



RELEASE THAT WITCH

BOOK 08

Er Mu

EPUB CREATION BY LISA HAYES

Release That Witch

(放开那个女巫)

by

Er Mu

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Synopsis

Cheng Yan transmigrated only to end up in a medieval Europe like world, becoming Roland, a Royal Prince. But this world doesn't seem to be the same as his former world, despite some similarities. Witches are real and they actually can use magic?

Follow Roland's battle for the throne against his siblings. Will he be able to win, even though the king already declared him to be a hopeless case and with the worst starting situation? With his knowledge of modern technologies and the help of the witches, who are known as devils' servants and are hunted by the the Holy Church, he might have a fighting chance.

Now, let his journey begin.

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Chapter 701: A Hundred Years of Evolution

"Wow! I didn't know that Maggie had such great power!" Amy exclaimed.

"Coo, coo!"

"She does?" Lightning expressed some dissatisfaction. "She's just older than us. When I reach adulthood, I'll surely develop even stronger, new abilities!"

"Oh... then, can you tell me what new ability Miss. Maggie gained once she reached adulthood?"

"She transformed into a flying monster for the first time. In that form she's massive and fierce looking, her body even shadows the sun when she soars through the sky. That form isn't lovely at all."

"Coo..." Lightning dropped her head in despondency.

"A flying monster... I'd love to see that!"

"Me too!"

The group of witches surrounded Maggie and Lightning. No. 76 felt anxious and thought to herself, "These imbeciles are all amateurs. They don't seem to understand at all. Who cares about a Senior Witch looking cute or dreadful? Isn't the point supposed to

be about the relationship between your evolution of power and the Magic Cyclone, as well as about how to become a Senior Witch?" No. 76 struggled to maintain her smile and she felt her mouth as it started to twitch.

Sensing that the subject of the conservation had been diverted from the point, No. 76 had no choice but to speak, "Maggie appears to be exactly like any normal pigeon... how do we know that her power already went through an evolution?"

There was a possibility this question could expose her identity, but No. 76 didn't care much about that at this point.

No. 76 decided to take the chance regardless. " Perhaps they knew a way to discern the difference between the Day of Awakening and the solidification of adulthood. Even so, they may have confused a derivative skill as a High Awakening, sometimes a lucky person received multiple derivative skills. "

"We differentiate it by the magic power," Wendy answered No. 76's question, "if we say that a normal witch's magic power is like a cyclone or a thin mist, the magic power will cohere and become a bright new form, after the evolution. For instance, Maggie's magic power now takes the form of stretched white wings, very different from the foggy mist in her past."

"Her description of the reconstruction of the magic's cohesion is exactly the same as the definition presented by the Union."

Wendy's words eradicated the last of No. 76 doubts. If Wendy

wasn't lying, then Maggie was indeed a Senior Witch.

Although No.76 didn't have the ability to observe magic power directly, Wendy's confidence in her words, and the accuracy of her theory, showed that she had a comprehensive knowledge regarding the magic evolution.

"I see how it is," No. 76 tried to conceal her inner excitement as she pretended not to understand the issue, "Your power... is like that too then?"

"I haven't cohered my magic power." Wendy said frankly, "Compared to Anna, I still have a lot to learn."

"So, she became the manager of the whole union as an 'Original Witch' and even befriended the higher ascendants?" Observing the intimate and amiable look of the pigeon, No.76 suddenly had a thought, she had indeed slept for too long. This world was drastically different from the Taquila era that she had known.

The witches of the Kingdom of Wolfheart didn't sense No. 76's complex emotions, except for Annie. The three witches were playing with Maggie and laughing.

As the group climbed the mountain, No. 76 deliberately slowed down and dropped to the back of the group.

She moved her hand, which bore a ring of Five-Colors Stone, up to her eyes and pretended to rub her eyes so she could observe

Lightning and Maggie through the gleaming Magic Stone.

Since Lightning and Maggie were using their powers, two conspicuous orange lights appeared before No.76's eyes.

The beams of light above Lightning's head were similar to that of Annie's. They were about a finger width wide. Maggie's beams of light were thicker and about the width of an arm. This aligned with the theory that the Key to gaining a Senior Witch status was more complex.

When compared to the beams of the light from last night's infiltrator, their beams of light were much thinner, not to mention the gigantic, wall-like beam of light that had been in the Castle District.

"None of them are the Chosen One."

No. 76 felt an uneasiness in her heart as she remembered the name of the two.

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After they had entered the North Slope Mine, the noise surrounding them became louder and louder. The witches were surprised to see that the mine was still in full operation, despite the snow and frigid winds. The busy miners could be seen everywhere on the street.

To their surprise, none of the miners wore ragged prisoner's cloth. Instead, the miners were all wearing thick leather coats with different colored cloth belts wrapped around their heads. The cloth seemed to represent different work. The ground near the entrance of the mine was covered with iron bars of the same width. Four-wheel carriages moved on the iron bars, but there were no drivers or horses.

Colorful banners were hanging down from the orbit. There were big letters on the banners—labor is the most glorious act, use your own hands to win the future, ten years of working and a hundred years of housing...The scarlet banners, white snow, and black railway composed the main colors of the mine.

"Before His Majesty became Lord of Border Town, the seasonal ore from Border Town would only exchange for a few hundred gold royals. During the winter, workers were unable to produce any ore due to the Months of Demons. Locals couldn't even feed themselves with the money they could get." Wendy slowed her pace and turned around, "After His Majesty arrived in the Western Region, and saved a witch named Anna, the door to cooperation between witches and humans was thus opened."

"Do you see those black steel machines? They are hand-made by Anna. They can dig tubs, drain water without the drive of magic power, and can be operated by anyone. With this equipment, the production of the mine increased more than ten times. People's salary now, not only filled their stomachs but also allowed them to buy new cloth or homes. The obvious profits allowed the town's people to accept the existence of witches."

"You guys asked recently what the witches job is. The answer is to create a better life." Wendy stroked the red hair on her forehead and said proudly, "If you guys joined the Witch Union, we could build this city together and fight for this big family. The citizens will firmly remember your names in the future."

They could tell that even Annie, who was usually very composed, had been shaken by Wendy's words. Her hands that held the wheelchair flexed and fully showed her emotions. The rest of the people seemed dazed after they heard the words 'family of witches.' To refugees like them, there was nothing more enchanting than a cozy place to live.

Only No. 76's heart was filled with doubts. "The key point of the change in Wendy's story was not the witches, but the black machinery. A local citizen would be a lowerclassman, even among the common people. How had they known how to build those machines? An awakening would only bring a boost to the person's magic power and physical strength, however, it would not bring them unseen knowledge."

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Wendy's next sentence almost caused No. 76 to have a heart attack.

"Since we have reached the North Slope Mountain, let's go see Miss Anna." Wendy smiled softly, "She is not only the busiest witch in the union but also the only genius that has gone through two evolutions."

Chapter 702: Someone Impossible to Meet

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Passing through a mountain path guarded by numerous guards, No. 76 could see the red brick wall looming in the snow forest.

Judging from the outposts set along the path, No. 76 was sure that she would not have been allowed to enter such a restricted area if she had acted alone. Senior Witches were finally treated in a way befitting their position. At least, such a massive display of guards would not be disgraceful to these promoted people.

Although she did not understand why a witch so gifted would build her home on the North Slope Mountain Ridges.

Furthermore, No. 76 still was not fully convinced about what Wendy had said. Anyhow, it sounded too incredible to her that a witch could experience awakenings twice so soon after she had come of age. She knew that even though the number of times a witch awakened did not represent one's strength or ability, yet the perseverance, intelligence, and perception one required to achieve awakenings twice were much more than she could imagine. Even in the entire Union, there were hardly any witches who was as exceptional as this one. She was really surprised to meet such a witch in the kingdom of the common people.

As they walked close to the walls, No. 76 noticed something strange.

"Is this really where the witch lives?" Looking over the top of the walls, No. 76 could only see a few roofs put up with canvas. There was no castle or stone tower here, not even a one-story house.

"Here we are." Wendy knocked on the gate of the yard, "The backyard of North Slope Mountain is the research and development center of all kinds of mechanical equipment in Neverwinter. Apart from studying, Anna often spends her time working here. To ensure her safety, His Majesty has blocked the entire mountain path to prohibit unauthorized people from entering."

"It's only an institute..." No. 76 frowned secretly. "The guards on the path don't belong to Anna but are sent by the king. It looks like he's watching her rather than protecting her."

"Sister Wendy." A lively little girl opened the door. "I've been waiting for you for a long time!"

"Good girl, where's your sister?"

"She's doing a machine tool test with Sister Anna."

"This is...?" Amy asked.

"Lucia's sister, Ring White." Wendy introduced, "She's now a probationary clerk for the Witch Union and hasn't awakened yet."

"How are you?" The little girl greeted politely. "Please come in."

"Lucia White also spends a lot of time here working with Anna and she's responsible for the research work on metal materials," Wendy said as she led everyone inside the yard, "By the way, her ability also evolved when she came of age, and the improvement of her magic power is quite dramatic, like Anna's. She's among the few witches who could drive a Sigil of God's Will."

No. 76 almost stumbled over the threshold as she heard this.

"Wait, what she's talking about?"

"Sigil of God's Will?" No. 76 could not believe her ears.

Luckily, someone soon asked, "What's a Sigil?"

"A Sigil of God's Will." Wendy repeated with a smile. "It's a weapon that requires a tremendous amount of magic power, most people find it hard to light the four Magic Stones on it. His Majesty has hung it on the wall of the castle's hall for everyone to test their magic powers. If you join the Witch Union in the future, you have the chance to experience it yourself. At the moment, only four members of the Witch Union are capable of lighting the last Magic Stone on Sigil. Everyone is now guessing who the fifth will be."

"Hang it on the hall? Only four witches?"

No. 76 felt like she was listening to a fantasy. Even hearing the name of Sigil of God's Will was enough to surprise her, let alone

caring about where they found it. In the Taquila age, the Sigil was the exclusive weapon for the Three Chiefs of the Union. Expect for Transcendents who spent all of their time on training, there was no one who had the required magic power to drive the golden thunder.

"But here they actually have 'only' four witches who could activate the Sigil? Don't be ridiculous! Does the Witch Union possess even more Transcendents than the Union?"

"Moreover, from what Wendy said, both Anna and Lucia aren't Extraordinary witches now. Then how could they advance to become Transcendents?"

"What sounds crazier to me is the way that the king of common people deals with the Sigil of God's Will. Since there are witches who can activate it, he must have seen the tremendous power it could cast. Then why has he placed such a precious weapon in the hall for all the witches to play with? The Sigil is a war trophy for the slaughter of a Senior Demon. Does this guy not have any common sense?"

No. 76 suddenly felt a slight pain in her brain.

The information that Lucia was also a Senior Witch had numbed her.

No. 76 had seen three promoted witches in just one morning. All she wanted to do now was to ask someone why a border city ruled by common people would harbor so many Senior Witches. What

was more mind-blowing to her was that they did not have any awareness of how to be a superior. For example, Lucia had been introduced by Lightning and had already integrated herself with the witches of Wolfheart. Anna was much calmer, but No. 76 could see from her face that she did not have any complaints about being managed by an Original Witch, Wendy. Through their conversations, you could see that Anna and Wendy had an affinity and trust between them.

When No. 76 could not hold back her curiosity any longer and be about to blurt out her questions, she heard someone finally mention this point.

"May I ask how many people in the Witch Union have evolved abilities that are new?" Broken Sword's question was as sweet as the sound of nature to No. 76.

But shortly after that, No. 76 was shocked by Wendy's response. She saw Wendy counting the number with her fingers. "Well... one, two, three... nine, ten, just ten."

"10..."

No. 76 was so overwhelmed she had no energy to be shocked.

If the information provided by 'Black Money' was correct, there were only about 20 witches that lived in the Western Region of Graycastle. In her plan, she merely viewed Neverwinter as her first stop, her target was Sleeping Island in the Fjords, as it was the place that had the most witches.

But she did not expect to find 10 Senior Witches here.

"Was this a mockery of the incompetence of the Union?"

Drawing a deep breath, No. 76 no longer stayed close to them but put the ring before her eyes, taking advantage of the time when they were showing their abilities.

The beam of orange light shining from Lucia was almost twice as wide as that from Maggie. And the beam of light from Anna was much more eye-catching, almost as wide as her trunk and was nearly the same as the uninvited guest who sneaked into the Foreign Affairs Building that night.

Undoubtedly, neither of them were the Chosen One.

It seemed that the 'wall of light beam' in the castle belonged to another person.

But was this possible? Was there any witch that was more exceptional than Wendy's genius, Anna, and had even experienced awakenings twice?

At the moment when No. 76 was wondering, the gate of the backyard was suddenly pushed open and a blue-haired woman came in.

"The anticorrosive results you asked for have arrived. These are the test samples." She placed several glass bottles in front of Anna. "Aluminium alloy sample No. 1872 had the best result like His Majesty had predicted."

"Thank you for your hard work, Agatha."

"Goodbye then." The witch, whose name was Agatha, nodded and turned away without paying any attention to the rest. Her demeanor gave No.76 an impression of the imposing manner that a superior would have in the Taquila age. But the moment Agatha turned around, No.76 felt like a thunderbolt flashed in her heart!

She realized that she had seen this person before.

Chapter 703: Coming from the Past

No. 76 knew her. She was sure about it. Even though over 400 years had gone by and she barely remembered the witch's name, the scene back then was still vivid in her mind.

She remembered the blue-haired witch dropped to one knee before the Three Chiefs of the Union, solemnly took over the cope and scepter which symbolized being a higher ascendant and accepted the personal blessing of the Quest Society's leader.

No. 76 was deeply impressed by the witch's figure when she turned to the audience and raised her scepter that as the youngest Senior Witch born in the Taquila age, her pride and confidence was deeply engraved on the minds of all the bystanders at the scene.

At that time, No. 76 merely served as an original combat witch for the garrison. When she looked up at her junior who was standing on the stage with boundless enthusiasm, she felt a sense of infinite admiration tangled with a hint of inferiority.

So the witch was Agatha.

In a split second, the dusty memory fragments were pieced together in No. 76's mind.

She even remembered in the later years that Agatha had been excluded from the central research group. Due to her errant behavior, she had violated the Quest Society's principle of never

recruiting common people.

But Agatha refused to repent. Instead, she decided to establish her own research tower outside the city of Taquila.

Her status and distinction had saved her from the impediment of other people. If any Original Witch dared to go against the Quest Society openly, she would definitely be dispatched to the frontlines and be engaged in fighting bloody battles until she would end up as one of the casualties.

Back then, No. 76 was discontent with Agatha and considered her behavior quite out of place at that time when there was a war to fight. For the Quest Society, losing her meant losing a young and talented promoted person. For Agatha, being excluded meant she would be deprived of most of the resources and bases for exploring the mysteries of Magic Stone. Both of the consequences would be a loss to the Holy City of Taquila.

However, for No. 76 who had experienced the fall of the Union and had waited for more than 400 years, all her discontent had vanished. Now, her heart was brimming with happiness... and a kind of incredulous surprise.

The happiness came from the unexpected chance of being reunited with a Taquila witch here.

While the surprise was she that could not understand how a Taquila witch could survive until now.

It was obvious that Agatha had maintained her body, even her look, and her age of that time. It seemed everything about her was frozen since then without even a trace of aging.

However, the bodies of other survivors had long ago turned into ashes, leaving only their souls that were being kept through unique methods.

No. 76 fought the urge to stop Agatha and instead silently watched her walk away until the gate of the yard was closed once more. After that, she took a deep breath.

She already knew what to do next.

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When the light began to fade and the howling cold wind turned sharp as it usually did every night, Nightingale noticed a slight change of Sylvie's expression and so she asked, "Why? What did you find out?"

"No. 76 has left the Foreign Affairs Building by jumping out of the window on the corridor of the second floor," Sylvie replied.

"Has she?" Nightingale raised her eyebrow. "Those windows are sealed with iron railings, aren't they?"

"Maybe they were rusty. The whole window frame could fall off easily by shaking it." Sylvie stood before the French window,

looking down at the city slowly hiding in the darkness. "She climbed over the wall and the guards at the doorway didn't realize anything."

"But she couldn't escape our attention." Nightingale could not help but raise her lip. "I'm right. She must be plotting something."

Since keeping Roland safe was more important, she called Sylvie to the office in the castle to keep a watch on the tour of the newcomers with her.

There was nothing strange about the behavior of the Wolfheart witches in the morning. After their lunch, No. 76 suddenly seemed quite uncomfortable. Sylvie could tell from her lip movements that No. 76 was tired because she had stayed up overnight. At last, No.76 listened to their suggestions and went to bed to get some rest. She skipped the tour in the afternoon.

Nightingale had thought it would be a quiet and peaceful day, but things changed unexpectedly when it was almost twilight. They noticed that No. 76 started to act.

"You've really guessed correctly," Roland said with great spirit, closing his book, "but an ordinary person who could avoid your lie detection does possess some extraordinary talent."

Nightingale coughed slightly. "Sooner or later I'll figure out how she did it after I seize her."

"No. 76 is moving south along a small street outside the Castle District. Wait, she stopped beside the street," Sylvie continued to report, "Looks like she is... waiting for someone?"

"She has neither magic power nor a weapon. It looks like she's here either for intelligence or is in collusion with others and planning something big." Nightingale analyzed with soaring spirit. "If it's the former, she would have lurked for a little longer. Judging from her hasty reaction, maybe she'll attack tonight."

"Attack? Attack whom?" Sylvie asked.

"Um... well, we'll figure it out later."

After 10 minutes, Sylvie's voice turned harsh. "Why? She's moving again... and is now she's targeting... Oh no, isn't that Agatha?"

"It's nothing unusual for her to be here since it's time for the workers to change shifts..." Nightingale frowned. "Are you sure No. 76 who doesn't have the God's Stone of Retaliation is targeting Agatha, a combat witch?"

"Agatha reacted! No... How's this possible!" Sylvie shouted incredulously. "No. 76 shows the response of God's Stone."

The information shocked Nightingale and Roland.

"Nightingale!"

"I'll be right there." Before Roland could finish, Nightingale had entered the Mist. "Sylvie, protect His Majesty in my absence."

...

Agatha's hands were suspended in mid-air, and her heart sank abruptly.

It was a small street she was walking on, leading to the Castle District, few citizens would pass by usually, especially at nightfall. When she noticed someone approaching from behind, without the slightest hesitation, she turned around and summoned Ice to freeze the attacker's feet.

But, after Ice emerged in the mid-air, it lasted no more than one second, as if it never existed.

"It's... God's Stone of Retaliation?"

"No, if she wears a God's Stone, Ice shouldn't be able to get near her."

Just in front of her, a few seconds ago, the icicle she summoned was formed by magic power before it vanished.

"How could this be possible?"

But Agatha understood that it was not the right time to probe into that.

She was sure that the attacker had been well prepared as she had been following her in this quiet street and was capable of dispelling her magic power. But when she was ready to strike, what the attacker did shocked her.

She saw the woman place her elbows at a level position and press her overlapped fingers on her chest, before bending down deeply.

She had not seen this etiquette for a long time.

It was a standard etiquette that was performed when a member of the Union met a superior of the Taquila age.

"You're..." Agatha could not stop asking.

"My respects to you, Lady Agatha, the youngest High Awakened," the woman said slowly, "Can we find a place to have a talk?"

Chapter 704: A Cross-era Talk

No. 76 closed the door to cut off the noise in the tavern lobby and then walked back to sit opposite Agatha.

No. 76 knew it would be much easier to expose herself once she acted alone and left the witches of Wolfheart, but concealing her identity was no longer her priority now.

"I thought you'd take me somewhere out-of-the-way." Agatha looked around the cubicle. "I didn't expect you to bring me here."

"The tavern has always been a good place for exchanging information and keeping in contact, my Lady." No. 76 poured Agatha a mug of ale. "I hope you'll forgive me for failing to provide a more elegant environment for our talk. After all, this is only my second day in Neverwinter."

Now that No. 76 was no longer concerned about being exposed, talking in the tavern would actually make the other party less wary to some extent, for they would certainly feel safer in a place with so many people coming and going rather than in a dark alley. Neither of them feared the cold, but Agatha would not accept the request for a private talk in some desolate place from a complete stranger who appeared out of nowhere. Even No. 76 would not accept such a request.

Most importantly, since she had neither hostility toward Neverwinter nor the Witch Union, she need not consider herself as their enemy, her previous plan of hiding was only for the purpose

of finding the Chosen One. Now that she had found a better way, there was no need for her to follow the original plan.

Common people and witches were now faced with a mutual enemy. The danger loomed ahead.

"How did you find me in only two days?"

"I tried to find out where you worked, the hours when you would return to the castle and the route you would take... I made the witches of Wolfheart ask Wendy about the first two things and I heard about your usual route from the residents." No. 76 was brief and to the point. "After I knew that you belonged to the Witch Union, I decided to take the initiative to contact you."

"I see." Agatha gazed at her keenly. "So there are other witches of Taquila who survived?"

"You could say that, but we're no longer witches." No. 76 knew that the only reason Agatha was willing to talk to her was that she had news about Taquila, so she did not conceal anything regarding this. "There was no way to preserve the body for hundreds of years and so we could only adopt another method to extend our life. For example, the body you're looking at now belongs to a God's Punishment Warrior of the church."

"You mean... not only can you control the body but you also have the power to activate the domain of God's Stone?"

"Indeed, this was also the ultimate goal that Lady Alice was fighting for, a God's Punishment Warrior that was formed by combining a witch and a common person that could combat the demon. Even losing half of his blood would not kill the witch as long as the witch's soul was transferred to another body to form another perfect transcendent warrior."

"I knew her plan was not that simple." Agatha remained silent for a long time before finishing her ale. "But judging from your tone, it sounded like the other survivors didn't agree with this method. And... Why did you come here?"

"Before I give you the answer, I'd like to ask you something very important," No. 76 said in a low voice.

"Go ahead."

"Have you already revealed the information about the demon, the Battle of Divine Will, and the Union to the Witch Union?"

Agatha nodded.

No. 76 suddenly showed a hint of excitement. "How did they respond? Did they believe you?"

"Not only did they accept the information, they've also started preparing for the third Battle of Divine Will," she replied, "In fact, a short time ago, the Witch Union confronted the demons and killed a Magic Slayer along with two Fearsome Demons."

No. 76 could not help but clench her fist. All the things had turned out as she had expected. Agatha had really revealed the information to the local witches. In that case, the Witch Union and Taquila have become natural allies, which meant that she no longer needed to hide her identity and could get straight to the point.

Although she was also curious about the victory of the battle between the witches of the Witch Union and the Senior Demons before the fall of Bloody Moon, there was something more urgent that she had to discuss.

Without hesitating, No. 76 told Agatha everything about the fight between Natalia and Alice as well as the plan of the Chosen One. "I've found the witch who can start the instrument of Divine retribution and annihilate the demons lives in the Castle District, and I hope you could help me to identify her."

Agatha was a little shocked. "Is there anyone who can really do that?"

"Lady Pasha told me so." No. 76 took off the ring and handed it over to Agatha. "As long as anyone summons her power, I can see the orange light that symbolizes the 'Key' through the colorful Magic Stone."

Agatha puckered her lips before taking the ring. She observed it for a moment and said, "I think you should talk to the Lord of Neverwinter."

"Of course, I'll tell Wendy everything... Wait!" No. 76 was surprised. "The Lord of Neverwinter? You mean... The local leader that is a common person?"

"Yes, Roland Wimbledon, a common person who looks ordinary and is even a little rash." Somehow, a faint smile appeared on Agatha's lips. "He's the actual core of the Witch Union."

No. 76 frowned and said, "I don't quite understand... what do you mean?"

"I was just like you at the very beginning." Agatha handed back the ring. "I realized later that without Roland, the Witch Union wouldn't exist, Neverwinter wouldn't be the way it is now, and Graycastle would never defeat the church. All of the achievements came from this common person. If you want to find and take the Chosen One with you, it's Roland you need to speak to, not Wendy."

"But..."

"Don't worry, he knows much more than you could ever imagine." Agatha chuckled. "You know what he told me after I woke up in the Frozen Coffin, when I was shattered and bewildered by the fact that the Union had disappeared long ago? He said that common people could defeat demons."

"This is too..."

"Arrogant, right?" She interrupted. "And I thought so in the first place. But in fact, I saw hope in him. That hope was something the witches of Neverwinter would believe in wholeheartedly. Hence, you must earn Roland's approval if Taquila wants to work with the Witch Union to fight against the demons."

For a moment, No. 76 could not believe her ears. If it was a wild witch who identified with the rule of a common person, she would think it made sense. After all, more than 400 years had passed since that period when the Union ruled the mainland, and the witches were superior. But she could not understand why Agatha, an authentic Taquila witch, would have so much faith in a common person. Additionally, the faith was not merely about recruiting common people as assistants for her experiment.

Although she had been engaged in missions involving the secular regime before, she did not expect the mission to begin like this.

No. 76 put the ring away and remained silent for a moment before saying. "Please let me think about it."

After that, she rose to salute Agatha once again before leaving the tavern.

Chapter 705: The Hand

"You can come out now." Agatha looked at the empty corner of the room.

After she spoke, there was a faint shadow on the wall. Nightingale then came out of nowhere and blocked the dim candlelight.

"When did you discover me?" She sounded a bit surprised.

"When I took the ring from No. 76," Agatha said as she shrugged her shoulders and raised the jug, "would you like a cup?"

"If it's your treat." Nightingale sat down opposite the Ice Witch and said, "Can that magic stone sense magic power?"

"It's not magic power but an orange light beam, or perhaps I should say... the 'key'." She took out an empty cup, filled it readily and pushed it to Nightingale. "Your beam lit up half a room. It was hard not to notice it."

"Did she notice that too?"

"Most likely," Agatha nodded. "She didn't mind revealing her identity in front of her own kind."

"She and I aren't the same, just like Pure Witch and I aren't the

same," said Nightingale, "did you believe what she said?"

"Yes, I did."

"But you didn't take her ring."

"Because I really want to help her and get her on the right path." Agatha also poured herself a glass of ale and then drank it all—the quality of the drink was rather poor, a far cry from Evelyn's fruity liquor and the strange-tasting Chaos Drinks. In spite of this, the sour bitterness still could not suppress her pleasure.

Agatha was elated.

At the very moment when No. 76 revealed her identity, the recurring sense of loneliness disappeared from her heart. It turned out that she was not the last survivor of Taquila, and there were other witches like her from the Union who had come to this era after crossing a time span of more than 400 years.

Although most of the Witch Union members were very friendly, and Wendy was very affectionate toward her, Agatha constantly felt lost—she knew there was a gap between her and the other witches caused by the accumulation of centuries, which could not be erased in a short time. She could not confide to the witches in this new era, so she tried to numb herself by burying herself in work.

The only exception was Roland Wimbledon. She felt a sense of

comfort when she was alone with this weird common person. At first, she found it hard to understand. She realized later on that Roland had the same kind of undefinable estrangement as if he were out of touch with this world—the only difference was Roland hid it much better than her, and hardly anyone noticed it.

Finally, she was no longer alone.

It was for this reason that Agatha hoped No. 76 would make a request to visit Roland Wimbledon in her official identity as a Taquila witch.

She looked forward to the both of them standing side by side in the Battle of Divine Will.

She was already in love with the life here at Neverwinter, and naturally, she hoped that her own kind would feel the same way about this place.

Furthermore, Agatha had a small hidden desire.

She wanted to prove to the witches that what she had said was wise and correct—co-operation between the common people and witches was the best way to fight the demons.

"This was why you neglected her deliberately?" Nightingale looked perplexed, as this was the first time she saw Agatha's real thoughts.

"No. 76 will understand after she's been here for some time." Agatha curled her lips. "Wasn't I the same?"

This batch of survivors did not think of liking the church... They did not agree with the plan of the God's Punishment Army and were reluctant to use the witches as sacrificial materials. They even split up with Lady Alice over this. This was one reason why she decided to help them.

Afterwards, Nightingale was silent for a long time. Only when the rocking candle was burnt to its bottom, did she gradually disappear and return to the darkness. "I hope she will make the right choice."

"She will," Agatha smiled and said, "I believe that."

No. 76 went back along the same path to the Foreign Affairs Building, where she bumped into Anna and the others, who had finished visiting the beverage plant.

"I woke up and felt much better," she said voluntarily before anyone had the chance to ask. "It was a bit stuffy in the room, so I took a walk in the yard."

"You should put more clothes on so that you won't catch a cold," said Broken Sword with concern.

Amy held her hand and said happily, "It's a shame you didn't come with us this afternoon! The Chaos Drinks made by Miss Evelyn were simply out of this world!"

"Chaos... Drinks?"

"Yeah, initially she could only change the taste of the drink. But after her ability evolved, she started to create delicious drinks that had unique tastes. I swear even the nobility in Wolfheart City would not have tasted something so amazing." Amy said excitedly, "Whether it was black tea, honey milk or fine wines, they would not be worth mentioning compared to her drinks."

Another Senior Witch... No. 76 had become numb. Although it was unclear what Wendy and Nana meant specifically by learning, there was no doubt that in the training of witches, the Witch Union was already more advanced than the Union. According to Agatha, it seemed that all of these were started by Roland Wimbledon, a mere common person, and that was what she could not understand.

Did common people understand magic power more than witches?

"I can testify," Hero echoed. "For a moment, I even thought that all the tribulations I suffered before had been worthwhile."

"If I could have such a drink occasionally, I'd never leave Neverwinter!" Amy stuck out her tongue.

"Then we should join the Witch Union," Broken Sword suddenly said, "as long as we're staying here, there's always the opportunity to drink it again, right?"

"I agree!" Amy immediately raised her hand.

"Yes... Me too." Hero nodded earnestly.

The three looked at Annie, so she said reluctantly, "I'll listen to you."

"Wait... You guys agreed to stay here just for a strange drink?" No. 76 could not help but feel startled. "And Annie, didn't you say that we had to observe carefully and be cautious? We should at least decide after tomorrow's tour. If Wendy heard the reason that prompted them to make up their mind, she would certainly not know whether to laugh or cry."

All of a sudden, she felt envious.

Simple requirements and easy decisions. As long as there was a glimmer of hope, they could move forward without hesitation.

What about herself?

...

After everyone had fallen asleep, No. 76 quietly left her room

again and climbed on the roof.

Against the howling wind and snow, she raised her ring in the direction of the castle, and narrowed her eyes to see afar—a light beam as wide as the city wall appeared again in front of her eyes. It still miraculously appeared in her field of vision, even without the activation of magic power and being out of the theoretical detection range.

She needed to find the chosen one for the Taquila witches. This was the main purpose of this trip.

Anyway, the chosen one's significance to the survivors and the meaning of the Chaos Drinks for Amy and the others was almost the same.

She made her decision.

...

When Wendy came to the Foreign Affairs Building the next day, No. 76 handed her a letter that she had written overnight.

"I am Phyllis, the Taquila witch from the Maze of Desperation. I have brought news of the Providence and the savior. I would like to request an audience to see the Lord of Neverwinter, to discuss our co-operation in the Battle of Divine Will." She did not avoid the Kingdom of Wolfheart's witch but solemnly said so in front of everyone.

Amy and the others opened their eyes wide in disbelief as if they had heard something incredulous.

"No. 76... what're you talking about?"

"You're a witch, too? That's great!"

"Phyllis... is that your real name?"

The three of them each responded differently, only Annie was silent.

Wendy did not seem surprised and did not report this situation to the castle. Instead, she received the document and smiled at her encouragingly. "Come with me, His Majesty is already waiting for you in his study."

Chapter 706: The Formal Meeting, the Before and After of the Dispute

Roland had learned about the situation of No. 76 from Nightingale. In fact, he was very interested in the distant history of Taquila and the intelligence about the Battle of Divine Will that the Taquila witch claimed to have. He had saved a lot of time and effort now that she had shown up by herself.

Other than Nightingale, Sylvie, and Scroll, there were also Leaf and two potted plants in the office to prevent accidents from happening. Once the plants' abilities were cast, even if No. 76 used the God's Stone, she would not be able to eliminate the crazed vines—as soon as she stalled her footsteps, Nightingale would be able to retaliate and defeat her.

Potted plants looked like decorations, and were harmless when not triggered by magic power. Therefore Roland also did not need to deploy a handful of guards to surround the room—he did not want his intentions to be revealed before even starting the negotiations.

When No. 76 followed Wendy into the office, Roland smiled and said, "Welcome to Neverwinter, do you need any tactical eyepieces?"

" ... "

" ... "

Everyone was expressionless. Nightingale even rolled her eyes and pinched his shoulder in the Mist. "Your Majesty, please don't talk nonsense at this time."

"Ahem, okay..." Roland cleared his throat and returned to his usual calmness. "So you're Taquila's No. 76?"

"My name is Phyllis, My dear King," with one hand placed on her chest she slightly bowed her head and said, "No. 76 is just my disguise as a common person, and since you have discovered my identity, the name has lost its meaning."

The formal salute with the chest gesture was used when the nobility met with royalty, or when ambassadors visited other countries. It was clear that Phyllis was not ignorant of secular etiquette. Roland did not mind the honorific title and slightly inappropriate wording. He was more concerned with actual interests, rather than verbal fame.

"Let's sit down and talk," he nodded. "I have so many questions to ask you."

"If I'm able to answer, I will," said Phyllis solemnly.

It was probably due to the fact that she hadn't spoken for such a long time to a "common person" like him, so her expression was quite rigid. She probably wanted to be polite and at the same time, not lose Taquila's arrogance of being the previous ruler of the world.

Roland was amused when he remembered Yorko's description of Phyllis. When she was disguised as a maid, she blended into her role seamlessly. Now she had regained her formal status and she was still determined to maintain that pride even if the Witch Empire had disintegrated long ago. Without a doubt, the name of Taquila had long been part of their faith.

"The first is information about you. After all, if we want to work together against the demon, it is always better to know more about each other." Roland drank his tea, and asked unhurriedly, "To be honest, I have always been very curious how the Union was divided into two factions. Since you were all witches, why did the church pursue its own kind? Especially after knowing the existence of the perfect form of the God's Punishment Army, the doubts intensified. Could you enlighten me on the details?"

Phyllis probably did not expect him to ask this question first, and she hesitated for a moment before replying, "No one expected things to turn out like this before entering the ruin of the maze."

"Did you mean that this was related to the ruin?"

"Without the discovery in the ruin, the God's Punishment Army could not be created. The remaining witches would not be able to survive... but unfortunately, we discovered that too late." She sighed softly. "Other than finding the method of Soul Transfer in the maze, the fugitives also found something else... It was because of them that Lady Natalya and the Queen of Starfall City split into factions, and this led to their ultimate break."

"Something... else?" Roland frowned.

"I can't reveal more at the moment. I can only discuss more in detail after we have found the Chosen One—at that time, Lady Pasha will speak to you personally."

"Who is Pasha?"

"She's the successor to the Three Chiefs of the Union as well as the trusted leader of the survivors," explained Phyllis.

If he were not mistaken, the Holy City had already collapsed at that time. Whatever it was that caused a group of dying fugitives to even settle their problems by fighting amongst themselves had to be a weapon stronger than Providence.

"Couldn't the two sides coexist? Since the perfect form of God's Punishment Army didn't cost the witches' lives, it would have been enough to select volunteers to attend the incarnation ceremony. Why did Alice want to overturn the remnants of the Union?"

When these words were asked, Phyllis's face showed a rare bitterness. "Not cost the lives of the witches? No... Your Majesty, things were not as simple as you thought." The shell I used initially came from one of the God's Punishment Warriors who failed to transfer. Do you know how long it took me to adapt to that shell?"

"10 years?" Roland pondered.

This was also the time normally required to train a knight.

"Nearly 50 years," she shook her head and said, "when I became familiar with manipulating a body that I didn't own, the original shell of the God's Punishment Army was already aging."

The witches at the scene could not help but gasp.

"The magic power that melted into the blood destroyed most of the senses, including touch, taste and smell... so the God's Punishment Army didn't feel pain and hence didn't feel scared of being injured. But for us, it was the equivalent of subverting the past memories. Walking, talking and forming a fist all needed to be re-mastered... At the beginning, one couldn't even stand up and hold a cup required a huge amount of effort. It took decades of daily repetition to train the brain to remember these actions. If you counted weapon and combat skills, it would take hundreds of years." Phyllis paused and said, "So you can imagine what happened next."

Roland frowned for a moment before saying, "Alice needed a lot of empty shells."

"That's right. Once a witch didn't die, one of the God's Punishment Warriors who had lived for hundreds of years would be much more powerful than a newly converted warrior. In order to continue this power that had been accumulated during years of experience, she had to create more shells to let the souls live on. Even if the new shell took some time to adapt to, but compared to starting from scratch, this time could be shortened to a few years."

"And the shell's providers were just weak witches, therefore Lady Alice had to replace the Union so that she could become the absolute ruler of the witches. This was the only way that she could easily use some of the witches as sacrificial material." Phyllis closed her eyes. "Under the threat of the Battle of Divine Will, she was almost close to success. Most of the Union's senior staff had acquiesced to her behavior... and if it weren't for the new discoveries in the ruin, the God's Punishment Army would have been the only way to survive."

Chapter 707: The Queen Of Starfall City's Path

"It sounded just like she had explained," Roland thought. Ashes once said that the difference between the God's Punishment Army and the Extraordinary was not their strength nor reaction, but their wisdom. If a God's Punishment Warrior had a witch's mind and were immortal, her combat experience which was accumulated over centuries would reach a horrifying level. Such fighters would be even stronger than the Extraordinary.

If he were fighting against the full version of God's Punishment Army in Coldwind Ridge, the result would most probably be reversed. The church only needed to split the whole corps into many squads to infiltrate the base of Kingdom of Graycastle. These squads could start battles through widespread harassment and he would not be able to guard against them.

So it seemed that the long adaption was not the main issue. As long as the soul could continue to transfer, it would be natural to keep the powerful veteran warriors.

Only one question remained. How many God's Punishment Warriors did Alice save before the Bloody Moon? The powerful shells also had a higher tolerance than normal people. They would enter the old age when they were about 100 years old. If one were involved in the incarnation ceremony at the age of 20, it could be used for seven or eight decades. Even without calculating the failure rate of the transformation and soul transfer, a witch could only create two shells. This directly restricted the number of the corps. If one wanted to create an army of thousands of God's

Punishment corps, the number of witches consumed in the succession of 400 years would be terrible.

When he asked this question, Phyllis bit her lip and replied, "All."

Roland was startled, and suspected he had heard wrongly, "What?"

"Other than the Transcendents, she planned to transform all the witches into the God's Punishment Army, to withstand the final doomsday." She repeated.

"Wait a minute, how could this be done? If you wanted to overpower the Senior Demons, one had to be a very well-trained God's Punishment Warrior. But to get such warriors, wouldn't many shells needed to be reserved to transfer the souls?"

"That's right, but there was another way to preserve the soul, and that was to move it into other vessels first."

"Other... vessels?"

"We call it hibernation." Phyllis's words caused Roland to shiver. "During this period, the person hibernating did not need to consume anything, and felt nothing, until it would be awakened again. How else do you think we could survive that difficult period of the early days? After the fallout with Starfall City, we did not have any usable shells of the God's Punishment Army, so we survived purely on hibernation. Of course, with the exception of

some witches... such as Lady Pasha."

"What about her?"

"When you see her, you will understand." Phyllis did not elaborate. "In short, Lady Alice intended to train and form sophisticated God's Punishment Warriors in a century, and then let the souls hibernate in order to cut down on the consumption of the shells. As a result, Starfall City would be able to continually transform the God's Punishment Army. When the Bloody Moon arrived, all the souls would be awakened, and the number of the God's Punishment Warriors would far exceed the limits that the witch community could bear."

This meant that every witch alive on the eve of the battle would be transformed.

Wendy, Sylvie, and Leaf lost the color from their faces. Although he could not see the expression on Nightingale's face, Roland knew she would certainly look gloomy as well.

"And Alice herself... Was she also going to participate in the transfer of souls?"

"No," Phyllis sighed. "And that's what I later heard from Lady Pasha. Queen of Starfall City and her followers never wanted to extend their lives from the very beginning. They wanted to devote the rest of their lives to the recast of the new order, in order to ensure that the plan of the God's Punishment Army would not deviate from the intended track. Only when she was transcendent,

would she have the strength and prestige to govern the Union... And only that flaming red hair would symbolize the neverending morale of Starfall City."

At this point, her eyes revealed a touch of extremely complex light, with fear, sigh, and respect.

Roland vaguely understood her intentions. They were both obviously in disagreement, yet he was still shocked by her spirit. In order to defeat the demons so that the witch group could continue to live, the Queen of Starfall City would be willing to pay any price and move forward without hesitation. Such an opponent would certainly be worthy of respect.

The gaps of the incomplete historical records had finally been filled. Perhaps the complete version of the God's Punishment Army was too cruel. Hence a split became unavoidable when something was uncovered in the ruins and the plan of God's Punishment Army no longer became the only viable solution to fight against the demons. After the split, the Union was severely battered. The Starfall City witches evolved into the church, and after Alice's death, they gradually swayed from the Queen's original path.

"Were the vessel, Soul Transfers, and The Chosen One all related to what was found in the ruins?" He asked.

Phyllis recollected her thoughts and answered, "You could say that."

"And you still can't disclose it now?"

"Only Lady Pasha can make this decision."

"How would The Chosen One be able to defeat the demons?" Roland frowned and said, "I can't possibly agree to work with you without knowing anything."

"I'm not sure about this either. The person in charge of researching... the instrument of Divine retribution is Celine." She said slowly, "We could first identify The Chosen One, and then continue this discussion. Confirming the candidate will pose no danger to the witches of Neverwinter. And Taquila would never harm its own kind in order to fight the demon. Otherwise, no one would follow Lady Natalya until the end."

"What do we need to do?"

"It's quite simple. Every member of the Union would just need to demonstrate their ability once." Phyllis raised her ring. "Through it, I can see the witches who have the talent of The Chosen One."

Nightingale had already briefly described to him the fact that the Magic Stone could cast a strange beam of light. Roland considered for a moment. "After finding The Chosen One, will Pasha be able to come immediately to Neverwinter?"

"It's impossible for Lady Pasha to leave the maze, but she will talk to you directly... with the help of some magical means." Phyllis replied, "She'll be able to sense my position instantly once I crush this Five-Colors Stone. So I can only call her after I have found The

Chosen One."

"I got it," Roland nodded finally. "In the afternoon in the castle garden, you would be able to see all the witches of Neverwinter."

Phyllis looked a lot more at ease after she got his approval. She did the formal salute again touching her chest and bowed. "Thank you for your promise. After the defeat of the demon, your name will be revered just like Taquila. "

However, Roland did not care about how long his name would circulate. He promised her request because he had a strong curiosity about The Chosen One and what was found in the ruins, but the rest was due to Agatha's trust in him. Since she wanted to help these survivors, he also did not mind helping out.

Chapter 708: Testing the Light Beams

...

For the first time, Phyllis felt that waiting was like agony. She thought that after four centuries of training, time would be the last thing she would be bothered about. She did not expect to feel restless after just one morning.

If Celine's argument was correct, finding The Chosen One would mean the end of the Battle of Divine Will. The instrument of Divine retribution had the ability to destroy all the demons and her mission would then be over.

Without the shells made by the church, most of the survivors would fall into a deep sleep that they might never be awakened from; or they might fuse their souls with Lady Eleanor to contribute their last breath.

Every time she thought of this, she felt an indescribable confusion. Aside from the long-awaited relief, she also felt a trace of disappointment. A life imprisoned in the shell, even if it could be sustained, was still a form of torture. Once the war was over, she could finally rest forever. But she also found it hard to imagine that once she closed her eyes, she would never again see the glorious world of Taquila.

The two conflicting emotions kept afflicting her until the afternoon came.

"Are you ready?" Wendy appeared in the castle hall.

"Always," Phyllis immediately stood up.

"Come with me."

Accompanied by Wendy, she walked through a promenade made up of olive trees in the castle backyard, into a small open space. It was surrounded by fences and covered by dense vines, so she could only see a glimpse of the overhead sky, and the "walkway" she saw when she came. The only way out from here was to follow the same path when she entered.

Phyllis instantly understood the reason for this. The witches under observation would appear one by one at the end of the promenade. This distance did not affect the observation, yet also guaranteed the safety of the Union members.

If she had any unforeseen movements, this promenade would definitely be a huge obstacle for her.

Phyllis did not feel repulsed and instead, she started to have a better impression of the king who was a common person—at least he did not regard the witch as an optional accessory. His behavior was completely understandable before he could fully trust her.

At the moment, her impression of the Witch Union was on the same level as the Holy City. A witch organization that was large and had various means would not be able to assert its influence if it

suffered from secular suppression. Now they also had a strong footing in the king's heart, so the Witch Union was starting to look more like the Union.

Shortly after Wendy left, the first witch appeared quickly in her field of vision.

It was Agatha.

When the youngest promoted person of the Taquila age summoned a clear, pale blue ice crystal, Phyllis observed that the beam of light was like Maggie's, hence she was not The Chosen One she was looking for.

After the test was completed, Agatha did not leave the promenade but walked straight to her.

"My Lady?" Phyllis was a little surprised.

"I used to be a member of the Quest Society, and I'm very interested in things such as the Magic Stone. I hope you don't mind if I stay to observe?"

"Of course not," Phyllis shook her head first, then politely gave her a salute for the Senior Witches. "By the way, I haven't yet thanked you for your help. If it weren't for you, I wouldn't have been able to pick The Chosen One that quickly. "

"It was your own choice as well," said Agatha, waving her hand.

"Let's continue watching."

"Okay."

One by one, the witches displayed their ability at the end of the corridor. She placed the ring between the two people. Other than observing the intensity of the light beams, Agatha also recorded the results.

During this period, Phyllis also found a lot of dazzling orange lights. For example, the width of the light beam of the witch named Soraya was more than that of her shoulders and she was even better than Anna or Nightingale. There was another witch called Evelyn, whose light beam had an alarming intensity which was almost twice that of Anna.

Echo and Summer were those who had stronger orange lights. Both also reached the same level of body width.

The most prominent member of the union was Leaf.

When she cast her magic, Phyllis thought for a moment that she had seen Lady Eleanor. Countless orange lights with as wide as fingers rose up to the sky, just like a fence connecting heaven and earth—these light beams came from each plant in the garden. They echoed the magic power of Leaf, like living creatures. The beam of light above Leaf's head was close to the edge of the Five-Colors Stone and did not pale in comparison to Lady Eleanor.

When her beam of light was cast, Phyllis felt her heart was about to jump out of her chest. She thought that Leaf was The Chosen One that all the Taquila survivors had been praying for. However, after forcibly suppressing her mood, she found that the beam was still a little bit away from the edge of the Magic Stone—the "key" would not change the orange light beams that it reflected, regardless of the distance of the target. As long as it was placed in front of the eye, the scene would reflect the real performance of the key.

Although the entire castle backyard was full of raised light beams, they were not that light wall she had seen before. The misty light beams were magnificent, but still did not connect.

Neither of them was The Chosen One.

After she let out a deep breath, Phyllis lowered the ring and waited quietly for the next witch to appear.

She still did not see that thick light wall after it ended.

"You have seen all the members of the Witch Union," Agatha closed the notebook, "Is Leaf The Chosen One that you are looking for?"

"The Chosen One isn't amongst them..." Phyllis whispered after a moment's silence, "Although her beam of light is amazing... but it's still a long way from what I have observed at night."

She began to feel anxious again. "Why is this happening? Did Roland Wimbledon hide The Chosen One? Or did someone in the Witch Union not come today? Is Roland actually unwilling to unite with Taquila to fight the demon, or is he still wary of the Witch Empire that once ruled the entire continent?"

Many thoughts flashed through her mind, and she rejected all these ideas. "No, it doesn't make sense. It's impossible for him to hide The Chosen One without the Five-Colors Stone. And Lady Agatha will never collude with the common people to deceive me. I need to stay calm at this moment... Unfair accusations and doubts will only make things worse."

"At night?" Agatha frowned. "The witches generally didn't practice their abilities in the rooms, and you should have been at the Foreign Affairs Building at that time. Can the Magic Stone observe from such a distance?"

"I did see the light beams of The Chosen One... Not only was the breadth much more than I could imagine, but its distance was beyond the reach of the Magic Stone, which was truly a miracle." Phyllis said in a gentle tone, "I swear in the name of Taquila."

"I got it," Agatha nodded. "In that case, give me the ring."

"Your Lady, you mean..." She was a little surprised.

"I know Nightingale's character. She'll never let you enter the Castle District at night. If The Chosen One is really in the castle, I'll help you to find her."

Chapter 709: A Different Key

One night passed quickly, and Phyllis stayed up for almost the entire night.

She shut herself up in the room and silently waited for the result. Calm as she appeared, she made countless conjectures about the reasons for the disappearance of the Chosen One; she even suspected that Roland secretly imprisoned the witch as a plaything and concealed the truth from the Witch Union.

When Wendy and Agatha came to the Foreign Affairs Building the next morning, Phyllis showed a rare tiredness—mental consumption was overwhelming for the soul and she knew that her control of the body was declining. Even her hands and feet had lost their usual flexibility.

However, she knew that she would not be able to close her eyes anyway until she heard the result.

Through cutting off consciousness, she could temporarily get rid of the shackles of the body, but her soul would still remain awake. Unless her soul could be transferred to the magic container, otherwise hiding within the consciousness would just be a way of deceiving herself. Phyllis even faintly missed the "long sleep" now. "The result is..."

"We found the beams of light that you mentioned."

She did not expect the first words of Agatha to crush the burden

in her heart. Phyllis blinked her eyes and whispered again for fear of missing the words, "like a light wall?"

"That's right, like a light wall. It does exist in the castle," Wendy said. "But we can't be sure whether he's the Chosen One you said."

In other words, she was not mistaken.

They found the owner of the orange light!

"No... it can't be wrong," said Phyllis, hearing a voice in her heart cheer. "Praise the deities! Praise the Holy City of Taquila!" "If she can emit such a beam of light, then she must be the Chosen One we're looking for! Is she a Senior Witch? What's her name?"

Instead of answering her, Wendy gave her an odd expression—it seemed that she was withholding her laughter and also feeling sorry for her.

"Well, this... I'm afraid that I'll have to disappoint you." Wendy covered her mouth and gently coughed.

"Could something be wrong with the Five-Colors Stone?" Agatha returned the ring to her and said, "I think you'd better contact Pasha quickly."

Something was wrong? What on earth happened?

"Hold on..." Phyllis suddenly felt as if she had been struck by lightning.

What did Wendy say before?

["But we can't be sure whether he's the Chosen One you said."]

He?

Phyllis could not believe what she had heard and gasped. "Is that orange light..."

"It's from His Majesty Roland Wimbleton," Agatha said with a shrug. "Besides me, Nightingale, Anna, Wendy... all the witches living on the second floor of the castle saw it. I also tested him with the Stone of Measuring and he had no magic power as usual."

"The weapon you mentioned to defeat the demons... must its manipulator be a witch?" Wendy finally could not resist chuckling. "It would sound good if His Majesty could become a hero who defeats the demons."

Phyllis's heart suddenly sank. "Although the instrument of Divine retribution doesn't require much magic power of the Chosen One, it doesn't mean that it can be activated without magic power. After all, it's a type of magic core, and the total amount of magic power of its manipulator determines how many times it can be used."

It's impossible... maybe something is wrong.

"But yesterday I didn't see the orange light above his head..."

"It's strange indeed. The beam of light disappeared after Roland woke up," said Agatha, stroking her chin, "and that's why you could only see it at night. Of course, we also asked His Majesty about it. His answer was that Zero's Soul Battlefield led him to another fictional world in his dream, just like an extra part of his memory."

"Zero? Soul Battlefield?" Phyllis asked hastily, "What's that?"

"The last Pope of the Church of Hermes," Wendy briefly explained the battle in which Roland defeated the church, "perhaps this caused the misjudgment of the magic stone ring. His Majesty was also quite surprised by the result. He also said that if you wanted to verify it, you could do so again at noon."

After a long silence, she gritted her teeth and said, "Yes, I want to see it again."

...

Agatha and Wendy did not deceive her. Under the supervision of the witches and guards, Phyllis once again saw the beam of orange light as wide as a city wall, and its source was the sleeping king of Graycastle.

At that moment, she felt all her energy was drained and a strong dizziness hit her. She trembled and fell on the floor, leaning against the door frame. She had already been mentally exhausted, and in an instant, the boundless darkness engulfed her.

When Phyllis regained consciousness, she found herself lying in bed. She saw darkness outside the window but did not see any stars or moonlight. The north wind hit the glass rhythmically and caused intermittent tremors of the window frame.

"Are you awake?"

A familiar voice emerged next to her ears.

She turned her head and found that Agatha was sitting at her bedside.

"How long was I in a coma?"

"For about half a day or so," said the Ice Witch, reaching out to smooth down her hair on her forehead, "your reaction really shocked Nightingale."

"Sorry, I'm fine now..." Phyllis whispered.

Though she tried to comfort herself, she did not feel better at all. She had finally found the so-called Chosen One, who turned out to be a common person. It was no less shocking than the fall of both Natalia and Alice.

The belief of Lady Natalya, the persistence of Taquila survivors... and plan of the Chosen One, were the reason all of them had been preparing for hundreds of years, yet it all finished in such a dramatic manner. Even though there were hundreds of witches on the Sleeping Island and Leaf's quality was close to the requirements of the Chosen One, she could predict that it would still be an insurmountable gap.

Perhaps their choice was not much better than that of the Starfall City.

"I don't quite understand how you view the Chosen One, but... even without such a witch, we have fought the demons for hundreds of years, haven't we? I thought witches who have survived such disasters would be able to handle any situation," Agatha said slowly.

"But we have failed twice, and we were forced to retreat from the Land of Dawn to the corner of the Wild. If we lose again..."

"Then let's defeat the demons," Agatha interrupted her. "I don't know what you have found in the maze ruins and why you devoted all your hope to it. However, I think if it's really effective, it shouldn't be a part of the 'ruins'. During these 400 years, the common people outside haven't stopped making progress, and there is more than one way to defeat the demons. Just like Roland said, common people could also defeat the demons by reasonably using the hidden forces of the world."

Phyllis looked at Agatha with tangled feelings. She was about to present her doubts but could not bring herself to do so in front of Agatha's confident demeanor.

"By the way, he added that there was more than one key to the deities, and that he had one as well. Maybe you should have a look before you contact the witches of Taquila."

"His... key?" Phyllis was shocked.

"Well, the key of 'art'," Agatha replied.

...

Chapter 710: Elimination and Innovation

In retrospect of what happened in the morning, Roland still felt incredulous.

How could an ordinary time traveler suddenly become the Chosen One? Should he recite some poems now to express his surprise?

When he woke up in the early morning and Agatha reported the observation to him, he thought there was something wrong with his ears. Since the witches all confirmed this, he decided to agree with them for the time being. Meanwhile, he knew the Taquila survivor would certainly not expect this result, so he invited her to visit him during his afternoon nap, as a way to strengthen the trust and credibility between them.

He probably grew calmer since he became a king, or he was simply lazy... anyway, after lying on the bench in the office and reading a few pages of Advanced Mathematics, he fell asleep easily. When he was awakened, the first scene he saw was Nightingale pulling out her pistol and Phyllis falling down unconscious.

However, Roland did not believe that the so-called "Chosen One" was really chosen by the deities. It was just because the Taquila survivors had devoted too much hope to what they had found so that they regarded the witch who could activate it as their savior.

Undoubtedly, what they found in the ruins must be extraordinary, for it made the Three Chiefs of the Union oppose

each other in times of the tremendous disaster. However, he doubted whether it possessed power comparable to the deities and could destroy the demons in one fell swoop. After all, if it was really as powerful as the creation of the deities, how could its creator quietly disappear in the underground maze?

Of course, he had to communicate further with the survivors for more details.

And the fact that his dream could be observed indirectly proved his assumption. The Dream World was indeed not entirely created by his consciousness. Its profuse details were far beyond the capacity of his brain. Someone else created the world based on the abundant material he provided.

He had assumed that the witches were the terminals of magic power transforming. Now it seemed that there was a barrier between the terminal and the magic power. This barrier caused the amazing changes of the magic power. It was like a mysterious black box which carried out the orders of the witches. In other words, the realization of the witches' ability was similar to his Dream World. The only difference was that he did not have the magic power to visualize it.

It reminded Roland of the relationship between the wizards and the Magic Net. The wizards could connect with the Magic Net through gestures, incantation, and reagents so as to acquire the power they needed. Comparing the barrier with the Magic Net, he could see lots of similarities between them.

After he defeated Zero, he unexpectedly gained access to the

barrier, but nothing more. The complexity of the orders was probably determined by the difficulty of visualization, rather than the strength and usage of the ability. On the contrary, the closer the abilities were to the essence of the magic power, the easier its transformation would be. For example, the direct conversion of the magic power into light and heat was certainly much easier than creating things, but its power was absolutely earth-shaking.

This was also one of the major reasons why Roland was full of interest of the ruins. The beams of light presented by the Five-Colors Stone was a special means to "send orders" in his opinion. An artificial thing was used to replace the witches and forge orders... the study of the magic power reached a level beyond that of the Union. Besides the divine titles such as "the Chosen One" and the instrument of Divine retribution, it might mean the seeds of new technology.

This alone was enough to prompt him to communicate with the Taquila witches.

Considering the fact that "the Chosen One is actually a common person" might give a heavy blow to their confidence in the fight against the demons, Roland decided to invite Phyllis to visit the forces of the new era before going into further negotiations .

In order to achieve a better "persuasive" effect, he summoned Iron Axe to his office.

"How is the situation of the demonic beasts recently?"

"Your Majesty, there are just scattered demonic beasts. They can be easily solved by the patrol team on the city walls." The man of Sand Nation replied after a standard military salute.

"Well, I intend to stage a cannon exercise in the city wall area soon. It needs to be impressive, yet also minimize waste."

The commander-in-chief of the First Army pondered for a while and asked, "Are you saying... a false one?"

Roland could not help laughing. It seemed that Iron Axe had more and more knowledge of the gunpowder now. He said, "To be more accurate, it needed to be half true and half false. When you display accurate shooting, use real bullets; when displaying fire coverage, use embedded black powder. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Your Majesty." Iron Axe nodded immediately.

Empty ammunition was commonly used in exercises, for it was not necessary to waste the precious howitzers just to impress the audience. The embedded explosives ignited by electric wires could also create a shocking effect or even a better one.

Roland briefly outlined the idea in his mind. "I hope the final explosion is dramatic enough. For that you can prepare more black gunpowder."

"Your Majesty, this may affect the operation of the artillery battalion..."

Roland shook his head and said, "It doesn't matter. In fact, I intend to phase out the black powder weapons, such as the 12-pound field artillery, which is no longer suitable for the fight in the future."

Its heavy barrel, slow launch speed, and small power of the solid balls had restricted its further usage. The battle under Coldwind Ridge fully demonstrated the limited lethality of the field artillery, especially in the face of dispersed-attacking and quick-moving enemies. Most of the soldiers of God's Punishment Army were killed by machine guns and Longsong Cannons, while only about 100 unlucky ones were smashed by the iron solid balls.

In addition, it was so difficult to transport the cannons that they could not be used to coordinate with the infantry attack or urban warfare, which further restrained its usage. The revolving rifles could still be used for a while. After all, the gunpowder consumption of the bullets was much smaller; even if they used half of all the bullets, it would not have much effect on the total stock of the gunpowder.

With the help of the Dream World, Roland's new chemical reform plan was already in preparation. The steady increase in the production of double base gunpowder had enabled him to eliminate the black powder weapons.

Iron Axe's eyes brightened and he said, "Have you designed a new alternative weapon?"

Roland smiled and took a piece of paper out of the drawer and spread it on the desk. He explained, "It's a type of rigging-angle cannon which can shoot at short distance or long distance. It can be disassembled to be carried by several people, and has excellent power. It's also easy to manufacture and operate. What do you think of it?"

Iron Axe bent down to carefully read the drawing for a while before he said, 'Er... I'm sorry, Your Majesty. I can only figure out its appearance... it looks like an iron pipe, but can it really launch shells with such a thin wall?"

"Of course, the key is the specific shell. However, it's still much easier to manufacture than a 152mm howitzer."

"Does the new weapon have a name?"

"You can call it a mortar," Roland replied.

Chapter 711: Bare Heart

During the cannon's research, he had considered many possible plans.

There was a saying that there was no perfect weapon but only the most appropriate. After taking into consideration his opponents, the battlefield environment, and the manufacturing capabilities of the City of Neverwinter, he finally decided to use the mortar to replace the obsolete field artillery. The mortar could be used in both short and long range combat and had a relatively low manufacturing cost.

Its shooting range could effectively reach 200 to 3,000 meters. It could cover the blank space between the HMG (heavy machine gun) and the Longsong Cannon, while at the same time strengthening the firepower of short-range attacks

Due to the existence of defense lines, the most important function of the mortar would be to cover those blank areas. One of its advantages over other similar weapons was that it could be easily carried by soldiers across all kind of terrains. They could set up an artillery station anytime it was required. Furthermore, the gaps in the heights of the mountains were quite common and this allowed the mortar's rigging-angle to be as effective as possible

But the biggest reason that made Roland decide on creating mortars was the production level of Neverwinter.

The construction of the mortar was much simpler than that of

the howitzer. The artillery shell of the mortar could be made by pig iron and since it didn't require rifling, it was much easier to produce without affecting the production of the 152 mm cannon. On the other hand, if he were to develop a smaller field artillery, no matter if it was the duplicator, the rifling cannon barrel or the artillery shell, they would all come into conflict with the Longsong Cannon that was currently being produced.

Before the new machinery tools and technology could be used, they had to pass all the required tests. Even if they failed in the attempt, Anna could still act as an emergency option and make up the key components of the Longsong Cannon with Blackfire without causing too much impact on production. But coupled with the new field artillery, the production needs would inevitably rise and the First Army would be at risk of not having enough cannons to use.

Roland also considered the development of individual grenades as a supplementary weapon and had even made a few prototypes for testing, but the performance of the prototype filled with black powder was extremely poor. It might have been useful in the city fights when unifying the Kingdom of Graycastle, but when it came to fighting against evil beasts and demons, its power was far from being enough.

Considering that the chemical industry production capabilities of Neverwinter were not sufficient to put a double based gunpowder grenade in every soldier's hands, he could only give up on this idea.

...

When night fell, Roland descended to the second floor and knocked softly on Anna's door.

Upon hearing the knock, Anna opened the door, a look of surprise crossed her features when she saw it was him.

Her surprise only lasted a few moments and soon her cheeks turned red.

After Roland entered the room, he hugged her from behind and brought her to the bed before lying on their back.

"Why did you come today?"

Anna's blue eyes were shining like gemstones in the night sky.

She usually went to Roland's bedroom two to three times every week as she believed a frequency like that would not affect their work routine. Of course, if Roland insisted, she would also not turn him down. Since confessing his feelings for Nightingale to her, Roland had been feeling guilty and had been avoiding asking anything of Anna.

This was also the first time that he had visited Anna's room. She was the only witch living alone, but due to the poor insulation and the fact that Leaf and Scroll lived next door, they would usually only meet upstairs.

"I want to talk to you about the Dream World," Roland said softly

in her ears, "I didn't have the time to talk in detail this afternoon. You must also want to know more... about my past experiences."

"You dreamt of a different world?" Anna quickly guessed the truth.

"You're right. The world was created in accordance with my memories, but it also contains special elements, such as the Force of Nature which resembles magic power."

The night that he told the truth to Anna, Roland found out that she was not ignorant of his feelings for Nightingale, but rather she had been waiting for him to bring it up first. Since that moment, he finally understood Anna's way of handling things. She would not normally hide her emotions or thoughts in front of him, but for some things, she would wait patiently because she did not want to embarrass him.

This caused Roland to feel a little worried as he did not know where her boundaries were. If one or two things kept accumulating, she might eventually become more close-lipped and would wait for the outcome in silence. Compared to being silent because she was afraid to hurt him, he much preferred this version of Anna. This version of Anna spoke her mind and believed in him with all her heart.

So, Roland decided never to hide anything from her, even if she didn't ask him herself, he would tell her everything.

Anna, who apparently understood his thoughts, smiled and said,

"I know. Let's start from where you live. In the dream, do you also live in a castle?"

"No, it is a tube-shaped apartment, just like an apartment house where everyone owns a regular size studio. Also, guess who is living with me."

"Hmm... don't tell me it's Zero?"

"Oh—ahem, why?"

"It's simple. You said that you started having this dream after you defeated Zero in the Soul Battlefield, thus the dream's existence must be partly attributed to you and partly to her. In a world created by both of you, it's not strange that you and her appearance in one place. But...she did not attack you anymore, did she?"

"No, she didn't. She had lost all her memories before awakening and has become a ten-year-old kid. The kind that even though she knows nothing, she still acts like a know-it-all."

"10 years old plus living together... did she become your family?"

"Um, Zero has been left to me by her parents. She is more like a tenant."

"Is that so? Then you should take good care of her."

"Why? That is just a dream."

"But didn't you say that it's not different than the real world? If that's the case, why do you differentiate it?"

Roland was once again surprised by Anna's unique way of thinking. The discussion was seemingly taking a different direction, but he didn't mind as he saw Anna's radiant look and tone that were full of interest.

They talked from the Apartments of Souls to the memory fragment, and from the Force of Nature to the Martialist Association. As they were about to finish, Anna's voice began to lower and she leaned over Roland's arm, her chest moving lightly, her breathing calm. Even though she was asleep, her other hand was firmly grabbing his waist as if she didn't want him to go. This being the case, it was impossible for him to go back to his room without waking her up.

"Nevermind." He decided he would spend the night here and hope that no one would notice him leaving Anna's room the next morning.

Roland kissed Anna's forehead and closed his eyes with her in his arms.

Chapter 712: Parade Plan

On the second day, Roland got up late as usual. When he woke up, he found Anna was nowhere to be found. What was left of her was only a few flaxen hairs on his elbow, with a hint of a relaxing fragrance.

Lying on the bedside table was his breakfast which was obviously brought up by Anna from the kitchen. Beside the dish, there was a note with a short line written on, "I know that you like sleeping. I'll leave you alone for your breakfast."

"Even on this occasion, she can't forget about her work and got up on time... She is a serious about her work."

Roland shook his head helplessly and got off of the bed. Even though the castle was supplied with heating, it was not easy to leave the cosy quilt in winter. The water in the wooden basin Anna used to wash her face was still warm. Roland used it to wash his face too, then carried the breakfast and walked up to his office on the third floor.

When he pushed open the office door, he saw Barov and Edith were already waiting for him. Nightingale was at her usual place, her exclusive lounge chair by the fireplace. She was reading a picture-book about witches while chewing dried fish. The relaxing expression on her face looked no different than usual.

"Oh, you came early." Roland casually greeted them as if there was nothing out of ordinary. "Sit down before you tell me what

you came for."

"Ahem." The City Hall Director cleared his throat, which looked as if he was used to Roland's reaction. "Your Majesty, the logistics preparation for attacking the Southernmost Region has been completed. The recruitment work for reserve soldiers is going smoothly. The scale of the First Army will reach 7,000 soldiers next spring, which is unparalleled in the Kingdom of Graycastle."

"It's only in the Kingdom of Graycastle," Edith interrupted unexpectedly. "The forces His Majesty has to deal with aren't those stupid knights and nobles."

Roland smiled. He opened the report on his desk and said, "Indeed, if we were to fight against the demons, neither the work of population proliferation nor army construction can be stopped. On the premise not to affect production, the First Army should have as many soldiers as possible."

Although unwilling to submit, since the king had given his order, Barov had to obey while staring at the Pearl of the Northern Region.

Normally, things like soldier recruitment and logistics for combat readiness should be done by the First Army. But Iron Axe and the few generals under his leadership were lowborn, which meant that they might be good at leading troops for military operations, but they lacked the slightest knowledge of financing and administrative management. So when it came to the issues of money and food, Barov had to offer a helping hand to get things done.

As the scale of the First Army further expanded, such staffing issues would obviously prove difficult. The simple management structure that Roland impetuously established would not meet the requirements for future development. Maybe it was time to make a new round of reform of the military system.

Roland resumed his focus on the report. According to the plan drawn up by Iron Axe, 1000 soldiers were to attack the Southernmost Region. 500 veterans set off from Neverwinter and met with 500 new recruits stationed at the Fallen Dragon Ridge. They then charged toward the Iron Sand City along the Silver Stream Oasis.

As long as they took two 152 mm Longsong Cannons with them, there should be no problem for such a force to conquer the Iron Sand City. But the key to conquering the Sand Nation did not lie in seizing the territory, but in the holy duel, so the role the First Army played was more to escort the leader and maintain order.

The City Hall could manage the logistics work of 1,000 soldiers with high proficiency, and the details involved were getting more and more sophisticated. The situation that the leader had to personally attend to everything had long gone. The preparations were so sophisticated that they were often beyond Roland's expectation, which was obviously a result of accumulated experience after several actual battles.

"Alright, that's settled." Roland closed the report and looked at the Pearl of the Northern Region. "Do you have anything else to say?"

Roland thought that if she was only there to report about the logistic matter, Edith should not have come with Barov,

For she was never that kind of person who liked to grab credit.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Edith replied, nodding. "I heard from Iron Axe that you're planning for a cannon exercise?"

"That's right."

"I wonder... can involve the civilians of Neverwinter as spectators." Her words triggered Roland's interest. "If your subjects could witness such a spectacular scene, it might greatly increase their enthusiasm for joining the army and their confidence of fighting the demons in the future."

"How could you involve the civilians in such a matter?" Barov said, frowning, "Haven't you seen the explosion scenes? What if they're frightened and think of it as a God's Punishment?"

"It would then be a God's Punishment under His Majesty's control. As long as the propaganda work is well carried out, the fright could be minimized," Edith said bluntly, "Even a fief lord might occasionally hold public traditional martial arts competitions to decide which knight is more brave and resourceful in battle. Besides offering some entertaining activities to the nobles, it could also demonstrate military power to the subjects."

"But cannons are nothing like the wooden guns in knights' hands."

"We could mark off the viewing territories on the city wall and dispatch police to maintain order. Considering the limitation of space, selling admission tickets could be a sound choice... Two silver royals for one ticket could not only prevent the civilians swarming in but also bring in extra income." Edith talked with ease and confidence, which obviously showed that she had given thorough consideration to her proposition." Besides, even the spectators should be sifted. Those who're qualified to purchase tickets should be between the age of 15 and 30, who would be the main force in every walk of life in Neverwinter in the future. Increasing their faith is helpful in fighting the Battle of Divine Will. For people in some critical departments, such as the City Hall officers, I think watching the exercise should be mandatory for them..."

Roland was very surprised. "Isn't this exactly a parade? Such a proposal not only connects a live ammunition parade with performance activities, but could show political sensibility and earn funds. The talent required for the military reform could be right in front of me."

At this thought, Roland nodded and said, "This sounds good. Do as you proposed."

"Indeed, Neverwinter needs some inspiring news."

When May passed through the square with a basket full of Bird Beak Mushrooms in her hand, she found that there was a crowd in the square. Although it was snowing lightly, it did not affect people's enthusiasm for surrounding the noticeboard.

She walked up out of curiosity. A publicity agent was shouting in the crowd, "His Majesty the king is going to have an open cannon drill three days later, on the west side of the city wall which is the first line for fighting against the demonic beasts. Do you wish to see with your own eyes how the newest and most advanced weapons explode the demonic beasts into pieces? Do you want to sense the shock as a heavenly rage? Go and sign up in the City Hall! As long as you're qualified, with your ID card and two silver royals, you could get yourself a chance to appreciate the heroic fighting bearings of the western region soldiers. The seats are limited. The opportunities are rare. If you miss it, you'll have to wait until next winter!"

"Is this a new idea of His Majesty? Even the propaganda wording is so unique." May twitched her mouth. "Carter probably will be very interested by it. But he doesn't need to buy a ticket in City Hall. As the Chief Knight, he surely would accompany His Majesty and attend this drill."

As to herself, she never fancied such stuff related to fighting and killing.

Chapter 713: A Better Performance

Not long after May left the square, she heard a sound of soft footsteps coming from behind her.

"Mrs Lannis, please wait, Mrs Lannis!"

It took her quite a while to realize that it was referring to herself. When she turned back, she saw a girl, aged 17 or 18, running toward her.

The girl's hair was tied up like ram's horns, and her cheeks had gone red in the freezing wind, but her cotton-padded clothes and leather boots were brand new with good quality. If it were two years ago, May would have imagined the girl as someone's daughter from a rich family. But now more and more civilians could afford new clothes, it was not such a safe bet to judge a person's status from one's appearance anymore.

The girl ran to May's side and handed May one of her two salted fishes while gasping the cold air.

"Mrs Lannis, this is a little token of my gratitude. Please do accept it."

May was stunned and then asked, "A token of gratitude?"

"I've always wanted to meet you. If my father had watched your show, he would have been very gratified!"

"But I don't know you or your father... Can you tell me exactly what this is about?"

It took the Star of the Western Region half an hour to roughly understand the whole story.

The girl's name was Jasmine. She was on her way back from the Convenience Market when she happened to recognize May from behind. Giving May fish was only a hasty decision to express her gratitude.

Jasmine's father was a former soldier of the First Army who was accidentally killed during the battle against the church and left Jasmine and her mother behind. The generous compensation from City Hall and the recruitment priority policy relieved them from worrying about their livelihood. Jasmine grieved for her father's death for quite a long time. It was not until the staging of the new play "The Hero's Life" did Jasmine pull herself together.

In the play, all those soldiers who bravely sacrificed their lives for protecting their families and the kingdom were bestowed with the title of Hero by His Majesty.

"Mother said that father used to be a common hunter. She never expected him to gain such an honor after death. She told me to thank you if I ever got the chance to meet you." Jasmine deeply bowed to May. "Now people call me the daughter of a hero, which makes me feel that father actually didn't leave me. If not for the rule that the First Army doesn't take in females, I'd have carried a

flintlock and fought against those hostile enemies."

"..." May remained silent for a while, then asked lightly, "But you might be killed on a battlefield. Aren't you afraid of death?"

Jasmine nodded, then shook her head. "In former winters, every family in my area would migrate toward Longsong Stronghold. Many people died on the way there and had their bodies were cast into the Redwater River. Every sound of something dropping in the water meant a person had died. When we reached the slum, death became more frequent. After heavy snow, the streets were always filled with frozen bodies. At that time, I often shivered out of fear. I feared when I closed my eyes, I could be the next victim."

"Since I don't want to live like that again, there needs to be people to stand out and fight for a new life," she said word by word.

That was a line in the play.

Suddenly, May felt that something soft, deep in her heart was touched.

She reached out her hands to touch the girl's hair. "Even if you'll lose everything?"

When this line of narration sounded in the theater, May vaguely remembered the whole square was in silence, the audience were holding their breath and waiting for the impersonator of the hero

to answer.

At this moment, Jasmine's answer was as powerful as the "Hero" in the play, "Because it is worth fighting for."

"I accept your gift."

"Mrs Lannis, please take care!" The girl waved her hand happily, turned around and then ran toward another street.

May stared at the heavy salted fish in her hand and recalled the time when she consulted the drama master Kajen Fels when she played in the grand theater in the former king's city.

"What's the best performance?"

"To firmly attract the audience's attention on you and make them think that you're the character you play. What they're watching isn't a drama, but your whole life... If you can achieve that, it'll be the best performance."

To that end, May practiced hard at acting, thought over the character's mood and manner, put herself into the story in the script whole-heartedly and tried to present every detail flawlessly. When she was 25 years old, her hard work paid off, she became an actress known to all. As a person from the western region, she gained a firm foothold in the king's city. During her prime time, even the famous actors in King's City's Grand Theater could not overshadow her.

However, her opinions changed.

When "The Hero's Life" was shown, was her performance perfect? Not at all. His Majesty's script came out so fast that the actors and actresses only had two to three weeks to rehearse before putting the show on stage, during which, remembering the lines took her one week. Very often the crew had to improve themselves during the performing process. For example, when she played the Hero's wife, she sometimes forgot her lines or used the wrong facial expressions. And it was not a love story in which she excelled in acting, so she had to conjecture many things, making the show far from perfect.

But was the response to the play not good?

Judging from the audience's applause, "The Hero's Life" was nearly as popular as "The Memoir of a Prince's Search for Love". When the leading actor said the line "because it is worth fighting for", the audience's shout of agreement almost shook off the snow covering the mountain tops.

"Maybe that was the best performance..." May thought, "In King's City's Grand Theater, such a scene would never appear. Nobles might drop tears for the characters in a play, or clap out of joy, but their focus was on her, an outsider's life. But here, the audience saw themselves through the characters, through the play... People see the future they want."

...

When May returned to her residence, she coincidentally met Irene and Morning Light.

"Ah... May, you're back right on time." Irene instantly stood up from the chair and grabbed at May's shoulder. "I was just asking Lord Carter to preoccupy some good seats for us. Let's go and watch together."

"Go to where?"

"What's the problem? Why everybody is talking perplexingly?" May rolled her eyes, pushed away Irene's hand and put the Bird Beak Mushrooms and salted fish in the kitchen.

"The cannon exercise, of course," Irene followed her and said impatiently. "I heard this exercise will be the largest scale exercise since the establishment of the First Army. There is already a long line in front of the City Hall. Aren't you interested?"

"Not at all." May shrugged. "If I had that time, I'd rather read my script a few more times."

"How about just accompanying me... will you?"

This little girl was really sticky, but May could not bring herself to scold Irene, because she knew, different from others, Irene showed her affection to others out of genuine emotion. May had learnt that when they were in the Longsong Theater.

May intended to refuse the invitation, but she swallowed the words she was about to utter. Indeed, she did not like things related to fighting and killing, but fighting and killing were not always terrible and unbearable. Maybe taking a look at it would help her to experience how the soldiers truly felt and she could better put herself into the next play?

Of course, she definitely did not agree with Irene for her begging.

"Okay." After a moment's hesitation, May sighed. "If you insist."

"Haha, really? Wonderful!"

Looking at Irene full of spirit, May shook her head helplessly. "Alright. I'll just take it as a sacrifice for a better performance."

Chapter 714: A New Life

After the couple left, Carter approached her to ask, "Do you really intend to go there? You can stay at home if you don't want to."

"Why? Are you unwilling to have my company?"

"Of course not!" He shook his head wildly, completely not like a grim-faced knight, "I want to be with you all the time."

Even in those tragedies of love and death where actors and actresses expressed love to each other, their lines would not be more exaggerating than that. She had never expected to meet such a dramatic person in real life. She glanced at him and asked, "Oh, who do you want to stay with, His Majesty or me?"

"Uh... Well," Carter did not know how to respond. Probably he had never considered how to choose between responsibility and love.

May was amused and gently patted his cheek. "OK, it seems that I'm as important as the king."

The Chief Knight relieved and hugged his wife with his arms. His hands, in the meantime, started to move down.

"Stop! It's still during the daytime," she tried to stop him when she suddenly felt like throwing up, "Ugh..."

Carter immediately stopped and asked with concern, "What happened? Do you feel uncomfortable?"

May shook her head, pushed the knight away and took a deep breath. Although she knew she was not sick, she still felt nauseous as if her stomach were turning. She walked to the bathroom and retched, but nothing came out except for some saliva.

"I'll go to call Miss Lily." Seeing this, Carter became more worried. He put on his jacket and was ready to leave.

"Wait... Wait," May stopped him. "I didn't catch a cold."

"But you're so ill... His Majesty's textbook mentions that the early symptoms of a cold are vomiting and diarrhea. Miss Lily's ability can cure the disease quickly. It'll become more serious if we don't receive treatment now."

"Maybe I'm not sick..."

"Not sick?" Carter frowned. "Why do you vomit?"

"This fool doesn't have any common sense," May thought, her cheeks flushed. She heard from people that when a woman was..., she might have similar reactions. But she had no experience of it. If she was wrong, she was afraid that she might be mocked. She was delighted to see her husband behave in a funny way, but she could not make mistakes on such an important issue, otherwise she would be teased by him for the rest of her life.

"In the Witch Union... I remember there's a green-haired girl who can see through things?"

"Do you mean Miss Sylvie?" Carter nodded. "She does see hidden things that ordinary people can't see... But she can't treat illness."

"Can you ask her to come?" May slowly returned to the bedside. Though she was just guessing, she still sat down slowly as if she were scared to disturb the little life in her. "Maybe Miss Sylvie knows the reason."

"You mean..." Carter also realized it at this moment. He opened his mouth with surprise and his eyes lightened up, and then he firmly clenched his fist and said, "I'll go to find Lady Wendy. If she's in the Inner City, there should be no problem. "

...

After the door was closed, May gently breathed out. This feeling was really wonderful as if the meaning of life had become different just in an hour. The possible new life warmed her whole body up. She closed her eyes, and could not help recalling the look of Jasmine when she had handed her the salted fish.

"This is probably... the taste of hope."

On that night, her guess was confirmed by Sylvie.

She was pregnant.

Roland got the news the next day and patted the shoulder of Carter Lannis who was extremely excited, "Congratulations! The baby should be born in several months, so you still can't forget about your work. When she's about to give birth, I'll give you a long holiday so that you can accompany her."

"Yes, Your Majesty!" Carter saluted, one hand pressing his chest.

"By the way, how do women give birth to children?" Roland suddenly thought of a very important thing and asked, "Is there any midwife in Neverwinter?"

"Midwife?" the Chief Knight asked in confusion, "What's that?"

"It's a person who helps the delivery. When the child is born, there has to be someone... um, help to deal with it." While answering the question, Roland also searched Prince Roland's memories but found that the palace mentor did not teach any relevant knowledge. "We can't expect the mother to cut off the child's umbilical cord by herself, right?"

"Ah, it's usually done by the elders. Most of them have had similar experiences."

"What if there is no such an elder?"

"Well..." Carter was dumbfounded, "I'm not too sure."

Aristocratic families would naturally not suffer from the shortage of manpower, but civilians certainly had no such privileges. Neverwinter had been established for a year now, and most residents came through recruitment and immigration. So, not many people had babies yet. However, once the lives of residents had stabilized, the fertility rate would definitely rise sharply. It was foreseeable that a large number of new lives would come to this world every year from the following year.

The problem was that there had not been any reliable medical system in Neverwinter up to now.

Roland could not be blamed for being careless, as there were no midwives in other cities, either. Sick people could only pray to deities, or buy some weird herbs from pharmacists with several silver royals. Thanks to Nana and Lily, disease and pains were almost eliminated in Neverwinter, which was the reason he had delayed the establishment of the medical system.

He initially had thought if the science and technology advanced by leaps and bounds and that they directly entered an information age, highly advanced modern medical science would still be nothing compared with the two little girls' abilities. That was why he kept postponing the matter.

Yet Roland now found it absolutely necessary to have a medical system for a city of over 100,000 people, no matter how

underdeveloped it might be.

For example, it was impossible for Nana and Lily to handle childbirth... They would be too busy, and once the war with demons started, they had to rush to the front. In that case, residents had to deal with patients in the city themselves.

After Carter left, Roland opened his notebook and recorded his idea of a primary medical institution.

Anyway, since it was a blank area, maybe he could start from childbirth.

Establishing hospitals, cultivating medical staff, democratizing health knowledge and the most basic means of treatment... Fortunately, the First Army had already had a basic understanding of these matters, so he only needed to make minor changes to the brochure used in the First Army and use it as a part of the teaching material for the public. He could also choose the first group of medical teachers from the First Army.

Though knowing nothing about modern medicine, Roland clearly remembered what an important role sterilizing medical instruments and the prevention of wound infections would play in child delivery in the future.

As for other parts of medical science, he could conduct further research in the future.

In the afternoon, he received a piece of good news.

Tilly Wimbledon was coming to the Western Region with Ashes and some other witches.

Chapter 715: The Feelings of Combat Witches

The sky was overcast as if covered with a thick layer of curtain. Numerous tiny white dots drifted down along with the wind as if they had wanted to fill the entire world. Yet the blizzard appeared insignificant before the great sea embracing the sky.

The Charming Beauty gradually approached Shallow Beach in the heavy snow and wind.

Roland had waited here for a long time. Standing in the chilling sea wind, he opened his arms to Tilly who stepped on the pier and said, "Welcome back, sister."

She took off her hood to reveal her soft gray hair, smiled and gently embraced him. Everything seemed so natural. She said, "The Months of Demons seem to have arrived earlier than I expected. I hope I'm not too late."

As their conversation continued, the pier became more bustling instantly.

"Your Majesty, there will be a welcome dinner at night, right? Can you arrange a hotpot again?" Andrea approached him to ask, her voice full of expectations.

"Ahem, mind your manners," Ashes reminded her.

Maybe she got to know him better, or she was influenced by Nightingale, her elegant noble demeanor seemed to escape her little by little. Of course, her beauty was so impressive that she still appeared graceful and pretty even when she was eagerly asking what to eat in the evening.

"Of course," said Roland, nodding. "In fact, winter is the best season for hotpots."

"That's what I'm thinking too," said Andrea, her eyes sparkling, "you're indeed a royal noble and indeed the man Nightingale is interested in... " Before she finished her words, her mouth had been firmly covered by a pair of invisible hands.

Ashes put her hand on her forehead and turned around as if she had seen nothing. Instead, she started to talk to Wendy.

Tilly seemed a bit surprised. She glanced at Roland and then looked at the where Nightingale stood thoughtfully.

Roland also blushed. Before Tilly started to ask, he coughed and said, "It's windy here. Let's go back to the castle and have a talk then."

...

Along with Tilly, the witches coming to Neverwinter were the card-playing three, Iffy, Softfeathers, and Nightfall, the former members of Bloodfang Association. It was not the first time they

came to the Western Region, so it saved Roland time to arrange their accommodations. After they put away the luggage, Roland summoned everyone to the living room and then told them what had recently happened in the Kingdom of Dawn.

As their partner, he believed that he should share information with the Sleeping Island witches and let them know the Taquila survivors as soon as possible.

In the end, all the witches could not help laughing. Ashes even asked him bluntly, "So you are the witch that Taquila witches are looking for... The Chosen One?"

"Or the first wizard in history," Tilly said jokingly. "My brother is always so different."

"I don't have any magic power, so you can save the title of witch or wizard," Roland said, shrugging, "The Chosen One is just what the Taquila witches refer to. We won't know what the Instrument of Divine Retribution is until we have further communication with them. Before that, I plan to hold an artillery exercise outside the city wall of the Western Region so as to help them regain their confidence."

"At the same time, it's also a kind of deterrence, right?" Ashes, though not as reckless as she appeared at first, still spoke straightforwardly, "just like the defensive battle of demonic beasts you had shown to us."

"I just don't want to have any misunderstanding between each

other," Roland replied, without saying yes or no. "And the exercise is not just for the Taquila witches. It's also open to the public so that Neverwinter subjects can see the power they have. Then they'll be full of courage even when facing demons."

No misunderstanding meant to let them clearly know his strength so as to dispel some unnecessary ideas. This was also the basis for diplomacy in the new era.

"Since it's an exercise, I don't think we are going to conduct it when demonic beasts attack us, right?" Andrea suddenly said, "I have a good idea."

"What's it?"

"How about using demonic beasts as the targets of shooting?" She raised her eyebrows and said, "Compared with simple wood targets, real demonic beasts will be more impressive."

Roland was a little surprised and agreed that it was a good idea. If he wanted to organize the public to watch the exercise, naturally he could not wait until demonic beasts came and then arrange them to stand on the city wall. It might cause a lot of chaos, and the demonic beasts would have reduced to meat sauces under bombards by the time everyone arrived. So he originally intended to use some wooden targets for accurate shooting and asked Soraya to paint some fake targets.

Andrea's proposal was obviously more enjoyable. Nothing was more exciting for the Neverwinter residents than watching evil

enemies, who had troubled the Western Region for so many years, be bombarded and turn to ashes.

"Those demonic beasts as the targets..."

"Just leave it to us," said Andrea, patting her chest.

"Ah, why not stay in the room playing cards?" Shavi responded with a bitter look.

"I'm also willing to help," Iffy echoed. As long as it was related to a battle, Iffy would always like to participate willingly.

"But will it be dangerous to catch demonic beasts?" Wendy said, appearing to be quite concerned.

"If we choose to catch them in the Misty Forest controlled by Leaf, there should be no safety problem," Nightingale said eagerly. "She can monitor the movements of all witches and demonic beasts in the area and drive away powerful demonic hybrids. Even if we meet a Fearful Beast of Hell, we have the Sigil of God's Will anyway."

"Then how about a competition to warm ourselves up before the artillery exercise?" Tilly laughed. "Let's divide the sisters in Neverwinter into three groups to see which group can catch more demonic beasts."

"Divide into... three groups?"

"The witches of Sleeping Island, the Witch Union, and Taquila," she grinned and said, "The reward can be a month's Chaos Drinks. I'm really curious about how delicious it is since you said it's far better the taste of ice cream bread."

"Wait... Will Phyllis join us too?" Roland said in surprise.

"This will visualize the power of gunpowder weapons and help her have a better understanding of it, isn't it? Killing a demonic beast may be easy for a God's Punishment Warrior, but if she sees a common person can also do it easily and more efficiently, she will definitely have more confidence in the power of Neverwinter."

"Of course, if she doesn't want to participate, it's ok," said Andrea, shrugging. "Since it's a competition, it's based on her personal will."

"So that's why..." Roland looked at Ashes and the others who had an eager look, and roughly figured out why they made this proposal. Although Tilly's statement was somewhat sensible, their original intention was more to satisfy themselves. After all, they came to help them peacefully go through the Months of Demons, but they could do little since the First Army was sufficient to handle the situation. For most of the time they could only stay in the castle, playing the "Fight the Landlord" card game. Compared with busy assistant witches, they seemed to be useless.

They were combat witches after all.

In this mass production campaign, he might have indeed ignored these witches' feelings.

"Then let's do it." Roland gave a nod of approval.

Chapter 716: Seeing Annie Again

After finishing the proposal for hunting the demonic beasts, the witches went back to their rooms for a short break and waited for dinner to begin. Before Iffy wandered off, Roland pulled her aside so that he could speak to her alone.

"I have something to tell you now so you won't be too shocked later on." He spoke as softly as possible, "I remember you once said that you had a friend named Annie before you were taken to the Bloodfang Association, right?"

"Yes... Your Majesty." Iffy blinked and was unsure as to why he suddenly raised that topic.

"Among the witches who arrived at Graycastle from the Kingdom of Dawn, other than the Taquila survivor who disguised herself as a maid, the rest all came from the Kingdom of Wolfheart."

Iffy's eyes opened wide. "Your Majesty, you mean..."

Roland nodded and said, "One of them was called Annie and she had also been rejected by the Bloodfang Association."

She was stunned and only managed to mutter after a long silence. "Is this true?"

At that moment, Iffy's face portrayed joy and yet it also reflected worry and guilt. She still blamed herself for not choosing to leave

with Annie back then.

This was why Roland did not intend to surprise both of them at the same time. He could not be sure how Annie felt towards Iffy and if she still had a grudge toward the girl that had deserted her, it would be very awkward if an intended happy reunion turned into a confrontation.

"3009," said Roland.

"What?"

"3009. That's her room number," he exhaled and said, "at least for the time being. She's like the one you described and if you want to know the answer, you can go by yourself to take a look."

Iffy was silent for a moment then bowed her head to thank him. "I understand, Your Majesty. Thank you!"

"Go on. Sometimes time is the best cure for everything."

"Yes!"

Roland touched his chin as he observed her running hurriedly out of the living room. "This is as far as I can help you," he thought.

"Room 3009, room 3009..." Iffy was silently chanting the room number

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while running toward the Witch building. She didn't even bother answering the questions of Softfeathers and Nightfall asked her along the way. She passed through the snow-covered castle backyard and the white-capped olive groves, went up the stairs, and quickly reached the third floor.

However, once she got closer to her destination, she began to slow down.

She began to feel more and more uneasy.

Back then, Annie took care of her throughout their journey to Archduke Island. When she learned that Annie could not join the Bloodfang Association, she did not insist on staying. The guilt had always been torturing her. It got even worse after she thought that Annie had died in the Kingdom of Wolfheart. There were many sleepless nights that followed. In the end, she vented her hatred on the nobility and presented a mask of power and fearlessness as a shell to cover up her remorse.

But now, this shell could no longer protect her.

She was instinctively fearful.

If Annie refused to forgive her, what should she do?

Iffy stood in the doorway but did not dare to reach out to knock on the door.

"I knew you would do that," a voice came out of nowhere and shocked her. She bowed down only to find out that the small figure of Softfeathers had appeared beside her and a breathless Nightfall was in the corridor.

Iffy could not help but be touched that they had caught up with her because they seemed worried about her.

"Every time you encounter something that concerns Annie, you always behave like a completely different person."

"Did you... all hear that?"

"Of course. His Majesty was speaking to you alone. How could we not eavesdrop?" The little girl curled her lips, "In the case that he wanted to coerce you, we could help to stand guard at the door, right?"

"What kind of help is that?" Iffy did not know whether to laugh or cry, and her nervousness started to diminish a little. "You actually came to see me be embarrassed!"

"Something like that." Softfeathers shrugged her shoulders. "Are you ready?"

"Ready... for what?"

Knock! Knock! Knock! Before she could react, the little girl had already struck the door a few times before running toward Nightfall. "Remember just say what your heart really feels!"

"No, wait..."

However, it was too late as the sound of footsteps could be heard behind the door. In a flash, Iffy felt herself tense up all over.

With a click, the door was pushed open, and a tall witch appeared in front of her.

It happened to be Annie who opened the door.

She will never forget this face.

Annie's eyes had a sharp gaze and her brows were slightly raised. Her compassion for her companions was hidden under her face of perseverance. Iffy had thought that she would never meet Annie again and had been afraid that she would soon forget Annie's appearance. When she saw Annie again, she realized that everything was just like before and that her memory of Annie's figure was just temporarily covered in dust and now it was brand new again.

Time seemed to stand still at this moment.

"Annie, I'm tired..."

"Annie, you should go."

"Why can't Annie stay?"

"No... I want to be with Annie..."

Fragments of memory continued to emerge in her mind and her outer shell collapsed. She seemed to have returned to the past and once again became that helpless and bewildered girl. She wanted to greet Annie, but somehow she could not make a sound. As soon as she opened her mouth, her eyes felt a stinging sourness.

Iffy could not control this herself. She embraced Annie and then sobbed softly before bursting into full on tears.

"I'm sorry... woo... Annie... I'm so sorry..."

Beasts did not cry.

From this moment on, she was no longer a beast.

Anne remained a little dumbfounded.

When she opened the door, she did not remember who the witch standing outside was and yet she felt some form of familiarity. Only when the witch clutched Annie and apologized while weeping, did she recall the journey to the Bloodfang Association.

It would be a lie to say that there was no resentment in her heart. When the Bloodfang Association tried to sell her to the nobility, a part of her anger from the betrayal also transferred onto Iffy.

However, seeing her crying so uncontrollably, Annie suddenly felt all the anger vanish. Back then, Iffy was as thin as a monkey with a muddy face and a permanent timid look. It would have been impossible for Iffy to resist the orders of Bloodfang Association and stay above of everything.

Annie gave a deep sigh, extended her hands, and gently held Iffy. "... I don't blame you anymore."

Upon hearing this, Iffy shuddered and started to cry even more loudly.

...

Over the next half an hour, Iffy was able to gradually pull herself together.

Throughout this time, Annie learned the whole story of the Bloodfang Association. When she learned that Earl Morgan was dead and the other witches were out of the control of the Bloodfang Association, the twisted knot in the heart finally unraveled. And it was all due to Roland Wimbledon and his sister, Princess Tilly.

Things seemed to be moving in the right direction.

Annie made up her mind after looking at Iffy, who was sleeping in her arms after crying and a curious Amy, who was there with the other witches.

"Let's sign a contract with Wendy and serve the king."

Chapter 717: Hunting Competition

Burying the black gunpowder and the detonators took more time than Roland had expected, mainly because transporting barrels of gunpowder to a preset location outside the city wall was troublesome. The snow that piled up to the knee level caused inconvenience in the movements of the carriage. Transportation had to be interrupted every time they encountered the demonic beasts. Even though Lotus was there to help dig the trenches and fill them, it still took nearly a week before everything was properly arranged.

All the buried gunpowder would be detonated by the electric detonator to ensure the best detonating effect—its principle was very simple. Since storage and transportation need not be considered, the detonator would comprise of a small section of a sealed copper barrel and two wires. The copper barrel would be filled with gun cotton, and a thin copper wire would link the two wires to form a short circuit. When the electric current passed through, the thin copper wire would be burnt out, and the surrounding fire cotton would be detonated at the same time.

The detonated wire would be buried in the ground by Lotus. Its depth was nearly five meters so that the route would not be affected by ground artillery or demonic beasts even though it had no casing protection. In the end, all the wires would lead to the city wall's main control tower. Any area could be detonated by just shaking the corresponding hand-cranked generator.

Hence, the preparation for the exercise was just missing a live target.

"Ahem, competition comes after friendship whilst hunting the demonic beasts in this exercise. Safety is the highest priority and no one is allowed to go out of the surveillance area of Leaf. Is that clear?"

Roland stood on the city wall and turned toward the row of "contestants" that had lined up in front of him.

In order to be fair and to reduce the burden on Leaf, the witches participating formed three groups with a total of six people. These were namely the Sleeping Island's team consisting of Ashes and Andrea, Neverwinter's team with Lightning and Maggie, and Taquila's representatives, Phyllis and Agatha.

He initially wanted to make Iffy and Annie form a team to represent Wolfheart, but Annie was unwilling to participate in hunting, plus the other Wolfheart witches had no combat capability, so he had to give up his idea.

"Yes!" The crowd replied in unison, especially Andrea Quinn, who was full of energy. Since she tasted Chaos Drinks, this witch who came from one of the three big noble families of Kingdom of Dawn had been obsessed with the unique taste of the Fire Dragon Wine. She even hoped to use her one month's share of Chaos Drinks in exchange for the remaining half-barrel of the Fire Dragon Wine.

In response, Roland replied that everything could be allowed for the winner.

"The rules are really simple. There is a time limit of one day, and whoever catches the most demonic beasts will emerge as number one. However, only the beasts that are trapped in the cage are counted." He pointed to the iron cages below the city wall. "In addition, if someone is out of Leaf's area of surveillance, then her team will be immediately disqualified. Well, the hunting action officially starts now!"

"Oh!"

As soon as his voice faded, Lightning and Maggie took the lead in the sky and flew toward Misty Forest. The remaining two teams could only rely on their legs to trek.

"Who do you think will win?" Tilly asked smilingly after all the three teams had left the city wall.

Roland always felt there was a hidden meaning behind her smile. "Well... I guess it would be Lightning and Maggie. Their ability is indeed not the strongest, but we are only counting the demonic beasts that are in the cage, so speed is undoubtedly an advantage."

"Let's make a bet, brother." She curled her lips and said, "I guess the Sleeping Island team will win."

"Andrea and Ashes?" Roland pondered. "Andrea's a professional long-range combat witch and Ashes is an Extraordinary so they're strong without a doubt. Though annihilating the enemy is easy for them, capturing the beasts alive would be much tougher. If they

want to transport the demonic beasts back smoothly, they would need to beat every beast until half-dead. Far more energy would be spent as compared to just killing the target, so it could be difficult for them to win."

This seemed to be a bet that Roland would win for sure.

"Ok, what are we betting on?"

"If I win, uh... I hope that from now on, half of the revenue from the sales of the Chaos Drinks can be used to reward those witches who have made outstanding contributions to urban development."

Evelyn also came from the Sleeping Island. Since this practice would help to attract even more witches, so it was not a bad thing. In fact, even if Tilly did not mention this, Roland also had a similar plan.

"Sure, and what if you lose?"

"I'll live in Neverwinter from now on. How about that?"

Roland was slightly startled and tilted his head to look at Tilly, but she did not seem to be joking. "Really?"

"Of course," said Tilly whose eyes flashed a hint of slyness, "but you may not necessarily win, so let's wait and see."

"I think so too," Nightingale whispered softly in his ear while she was in the Mist. "I forgot to tell you... Andrea's magic has cohered."

"There is a wild demonic boar approaching you that is 125 meters ahead on your left."

Tree trunks started to sway and a string of snow clumps fell. The rubbing sound of the branches and the green leaves made up Leaf's unique intonation—in this way, Leaf could talk to everyone and monitor them at the same time.

"Well... how far are 125 meters?" Andrea was still not quite used to the new unit of measure set out by Roland. She frowned thoughtfully. "One meter is two steps... then 125 meters are... "

"There's no need to count." Ashes rolled her eyes and removed "Envoy Ashes" from her back. "I can already hear its footsteps."

A moment later, a black figure appeared in the jungle. It was the demonized wild boar with roughly the size of an adult and grey tusks that were as thick as arms.

"Don't attack. We have to capture it alive," Andrea blew a whistle toward the demonic beast and shouted, "come!"

"Hiss—hiss—" The wild boar spit out clouds of white gas and stared with its bright scarlet eyes before rushing straight toward

the blonde witch who provoked it. If ordinary hunters encountered this scenario, they would certainly not think of confronting the boar. They would most likely climb up the nearest tree as quickly as possible, or wait for a chance to escape. As to whether they could survive the demonic beast's tusks would be another story.

But Andrea was motionless. She did not even take her beloved rifle down. She flattened her hands and opened her index finger and thumb to form a rhombus square. Through the center of the square, she saw the boar was no more than 10 steps away from her. She could almost see its dripping saliva and the shiny bristles of its mane.

"Bang." She whispered softly.

Suddenly, a powerful airflow shot out from her palm and made an explosive roar. The demonic boar seemed to have hit an invisible wall and its whole body was lifted off. The snow at its foot was swept away by airwaves and formed a dense white fog. The demonic boar's huge body churned two rounds before it crashed to the ground. Before any screams of agony could be heard, it was already vomiting blood and had fallen with its back flat on the ground with its twitching limbs facing the sky.

This was Andrea's new ability—by observing the difference between the bow and arrow and the gun and being forced to study by Princess Tilly, she realized her evolutionary direction: since both abilities gave energy to arrows or projectiles, why could she not directly provide the magic needed to shoot the energy? After more than two weeks of the journey on the ship, she gradually

mastered this new fighting skill.

Even if she did not have pellets in her hand, the impact alone could kill the enemy. And this type of shooting skill was related only to her magic. Its power far exceeded the previous shot and was more like a bow and flintlock. When all the magic was released in one go, the projection could hurt even her.

Chapter 718: Loyalty to Her Belief

"I've scored the first point!"

Andrea gracefully lifted her long hair to shake off the snowflakes, turned toward Ashes and said, "It's now your turn to transport it."

"Wait... Why me?" Ashes stared at Andrea.

"Because you're strong," she said flatly, "this is a team competition, and naturally we'll need to work together. Don't forget that we represent the honor of Sleeping Island. If we lose the match because you were too slow in moving the beasts, I'll report you to Princess Tilly."

"Overwhelming victory! Nightingale, did you see that?" Andrea looked proudly toward Ashes and felt an immense satisfaction. Ashes looked displeased yet had no choice but to bend over and carry the unconscious demonic boar.

After all, Andrea would not be able to move such a heavy thing.

"Stay here and don't move. I'll be right back," said the Extraordinary to Andrea, as she placed the sturdy demonic boar rack on her shoulder.

"I know. Hurry up."

After Ashes left, Andrea looked up to the forest and asked, "Leaf, could you please tell me where the next demonic beast is?"

"It's on your right about 450 meters away. It's a snowwolf." The branches swayed. "But aren't you going to wait for Ashes?"

"Of course not. That'd be way too slow." Andrea thought for a moment and said, "Hmm... that's about 900 paces away. I'm going to head off. Could you please let Ashes know my new location?"

Leaf was silent for a moment before replying, "I understand."

"Don't worry. It's only a stupid wolf. With you around to remind me, it can't touch me."

Even the gigantic demonic hybrid she met last time was defenseless in front of her new abilities—the original magic arrows were incredibly powerful but only had a range of 10 paces. Now as long as she had enough power, she could shoot to a distance of more than 100 meters. She even had a derivative skill that allowed her to hit accurately without fail. Even if the demonic beast had two pairs of wings, it would not be able to escape her attack.

This time, she was confident about winning!

"I'm sorry. I didn't think he'd get you involved in such a trifle." Phyllis looked at Agatha who was walking in front of her and said,

"I only casually agreed to it at that time."

When Phyllis first heard about the proposal, she did not think too much about it because she had lost her palate and the Chaos Drinks were no longer appealing. What made her agree to it was simple curiosity—anyway it was better than being idle and she could take the opportunity to observe the Witch Union's fighting ability. She did not expect that this hunting game was actually a competition and that her teammate would be Agatha, once the youngest Senior Witch.

"It doesn't matter. This is much better than staying cooped up in the lab and researching the Magic Stone. It's good to go out and get some exercise," said Agatha, shrugging her shoulders. "If I didn't have time to spare, I wouldn't have promised His Majesty in the first place."

"Is that so? Then... shall we just grab a few demonic beasts to make up the figures?"

"How could we do that? This is a competition."

"But I thought the king of the common people said that friendship was first and that competition came second? The others also agreed to it."

"I don't think that's what they really feel. You could tell from their expressions what they were thinking. Even without the Chaos Drinks as prizes, Lightning and Andrea would still be unwilling to lose." Agatha paused and said, "If it's just a normal

game, then that doesn't matter. But now we're a team that represents Taquila, right?"

"Yes..." Phyllis suddenly felt that Andrea was full of fighting spirit.

"In that case, if it's a competition then we need to win." Agatha paused in her footsteps and some crystals condensed in her hand.

Leaf's voice could be heard almost simultaneously. "A wolf-eagle demonic hybrid is 200 meters behind you and approaching quickly!"

Phyllis retreated two steps and looked behind toward the snow-white forest. A slender white-haired monster appeared in the snow with a howl. Its wings glided as if it were sliding on the ground, and the beast made almost no sound. It was no wonder Phyllis did not notice the enemy approaching from behind.

As the temperature near Agatha plummeted, the snow suddenly became hard ice. As the enemy approached, she threw the sharp ice crystals in her hand to force the hybrid to dodge and then caused it to lose its balance on the smooth ice.

The Senior Witch remained stable on the ground. She effortlessly glided to the side of the monster, placed her hands on its fur and instantly turned it into half an ice sculpture.

Phyllis admired Agatha's flowy uninhibited way of fighting and

could see why she was a part of Taquila. Although Agatha was a member of the Quest Society and had never experienced a real battle, she could still see that Agatha had put in a lot of hard work in combat training. In particular, when she combined both pace and ability, she was in an advantageous position to take the initiative—any enemy fighting with her on the ice would certainly fall under her control.

"How did you manage to find it?" Phyllis asked curiously.

"I summoned a thin piece of ice at my feet that could help me to detect the enemy as soon as it entered the snow."

"I see..." She looked at the mixed species whose body had been covered with ice crystals, except for its head that was hanging out. "Should I drag it now to the city wall?"

"Just leave it here. Since it won't freeze to death that quickly, we can wait until we catch a few more." Agatha waved her hand and said, "We have to find the next demonic beast as soon as possible."

Phyllis realized that she was serious. This young Senior Witch did want to win the competition.

Is it because she represents Taquila? So in the future negotiations, will her loyalty lie with Neverwinter or the Taquila survivors?

This question left Phyllis feeling uneasy.

She only took a few steps before she could not resist saying, "Lady Agatha..."

"Don't address me like that. Just call me Agatha," she said as she turned her head. "Didn't you say that the Taquila witches were no longer ranked in terms of ability, but that everyone was equal?"

"Yes... there has been a gradual consensus since Lady Eleanor sacrificed herself and fewer and fewer companions have survived... Neither the higher ascendants at the Union nor the most common Original Witches should ever be separated by rank. It was Pasha who suggested 'Every witch is equally important'."

"And I'm no exception." Agatha nodded her head and said, "The people in the Witch Union call each other sisters, and sometimes I think they'll be the heirs of the new era."

"I see," Phyllis hesitated and said, "Can I ask you a question... What exactly do you think of the Taquila Witches and Neverwinter?"

"I guess you wish to find out which side I'm loyal to?" Agatha said as she stopped in her tracks.

Phyllis did not avoid looking at Agatha and this was very important for them.

"I'm loyal to my own belief," Agatha replied.

"Belief?"

"That's right, so I hope you'll be able to move to the Western Region of Graycastle and join hands with Neverwinter in the fight against the demons under the leadership of Roland Wimbledon."

Chapter 719: "The New Union"

Suddenly the snow forest became silent. Only the occasional wind brushing against the treetops could be heard.

Phyllis was silent for a long time. "I thought you would stand by Taquila," she said reluctantly, "you were willing to represent the Taquila Witches in the competition and willing to help..."

Her voice quickly lowered. "That's right. I shouldn't impose too much. This is just a game. Compared with the Taquila Quest Society who had ostracized her, Neverwinter that saved her life was certainly more trustworthy. And in Agatha's eyes, they might still not be legitimate successors of Taquila... After all, they have lost the possibility of exerting magic after converting to the God's Punishment Army."

However, Agatha's next sentence rekindled her hope.

"I'm a Taquila Witch and this won't change."

Agatha's voice was smooth and honest as if she were recounting a most simple statement.

"Then why do you think we should accept the leadership of a common person?" Phyllis felt sincerely puzzled.

"Taquila... Starfall City, Arrieta, or the dozens of cities on the Fertile Plains all unanimously decided to accept the leadership of

the Union, simply because the Union was established by witches?" Agatha sighed softly. "Did you forget the original purpose as to why the Union was set up?"

The Union's original... purpose, whether it was the roundtable parliament at the very beginning or the Three Chiefs system that was set up later on, was just for one thing. "Overcome the demons," Phyllis said softly.

"Yes, it was to defeat the demons and it had nothing to do with whether one was a common person or not. After the first Battle of Divine Will, the witches diminished the authority of the common people and unified the Fertile Plains, only because they were too weak and their cooperation couldn't help to resist the demon in any way. Now the common people have shown their power, so if we serve the Union and Roland Wimbledon, what difference would that make? Only he can unite the secular regime and at the same time accept the witches of this era."

Agatha's words flashed like a bolt of lightning across her mind—

Phyllis realized that she had apparently misunderstood something, and the newly emerging idea astonished her.

"Do you mean... Neverwinter would be the new Union?"

"It'd be a part of the Union," Agatha corrected and said, "of course, His Majesty may not like the name. But no matter what it's called in the future, its essence is still the same—in order to win over the Gods, Taquila, Starfall City, the Witch Cooperation

Association, the Sleeping Island... and the secular kingdoms will unite to fight a bloody battle against the demons. It's not a question of where my loyalty lies, but a question of being able to continue. The only reason I was able to survive the Frozen Coffin was to see the day the demons would be defeated."

That was why she replied that she was faithful to her own belief.

Phyllis finally understood Agatha's ideas.

Agatha hoped to win the competition on behalf of Taquila, yet this was not a conflict with her serving Roland Wimbledon. Just as 400 years ago, all the cities of Fertile Plains were loyal to the Union. The only difference was that the leader of the New Alliance had changed from the Three Chiefs to one common person.

"Your assessment of him is really high," she said in a rather complex mood. "If the goal was only to defeat the demons, we're also constantly working on it, and the situation will be reversed once we find the chosen one."

"But we haven't found it yet, right? Or in other words, we have found an unexpected 'chosen one'." Agatha started to chuckle. "Rest assured, if there's such a witch, His Majesty will certainly not stop you from ending the Battle of Divine Will. In fact, he'll only help you to find her. This is why I hope you'll move to the Western Region of Graycastle—the witches who choose to settle here will surely increase, and you'll have more chances to find the chosen one, won't you?"

Phyllis found herself being convinced. Even if she didn't want to admit it, Agatha did make sense. "The truth is he's really able to stop the demons... do you really have faith in the common people?"

"I think I can expect it from a common person who connects the witches and all the common people together." Agatha raised the corner of her mouth and said, "Isn't His Majesty preparing a gunfire exercise for you? After it's finished, maybe you'll be able to understand where my belief comes from."

The so-called artillery exercises should showcase the key to what she calls "art." Although it was unclear whether the two had anything to do with combatting the demons, but since the genius Senior Witch already said so, she decided to look forward to it as well.

Just then, a string of loud roars came through the forest, causing the branches to tremble—"Ow—Ow—"

Phyllis's expression changed suddenly.

She was familiar with this sound. It was obviously the hissing of the flying Devilbeast. "Why are there demons here?"

"It's Maggie," said Agatha, curling her lips. "Her evolved ability is becoming anything that can fly, and the demon is no exception."

Phyllis let out a sigh of relief when she realized it was caused by

magic ability. But soon she frowned again. "In this case, it's too easy for her to seize the demonic beasts, isn't it?"

Lower breed demonic beasts were senseless, so it was easy for them to surrender to more powerful creatures. In the face of the flying Devilbeast, they would only be scared motionless on the spot and be easy prey. Not to mention that transporting prey from the air was much faster than dragging it from the snow. So how could Phyllis and Agatha win?

"Don't worry." Agatha seemed to have looked through her thoughts. "We're not without a chance. Maggie's ability is really convenient. But neither she nor Lightning, nor all the witches here, have ever withstood the rigors of combat training. In other words, they can't use their magic power to its fullest ability."

Whilst Agatha was talking, a black shadow flew over her head, grabbing a wild demonic toward the direction of the city wall—we can see that her stature was staggering, even the adult Devilbeast would be much smaller than her.

"Are you saying... Maggie won't be able to last until sunset?"

"The Devilbeast's breath is too strong, and will expel in advance all the prey in the area of activity. In that case, she will most likely change into the pigeon and join Lightning together to search for targets, and then suddenly evolve into Devilbeast to capture the demonic beasts. Change is a very exhausting process of magic and once her magic power is depleted, it's difficult to rely on Lightning alone to maintain the efficiency of capturing." Agatha smiled and said, "So the next demonic beast will be attacked by you and I'll

only be responsible for holding it down."

Phyllis's eyes brightened. For them, learning how to squeeze their potential was a required strategy of combat. At this point, the newly promoted Senior Witches were indeed no different from the fledgling newcomers.

"Yes, leave it to me!"

...

Chapter 720: The Competition Results and Admission Ceremony

Just as Agatha had anticipated, it was uncommon to hear Maggie's carefree roar in the afternoon.

When a witch was engaged in fighting, their highly tense mind would consume not only their magic power but also their physical strength. So, the Union concentrated on the key points needed to make the best use of the fighter's time. Allowing her to relax her mind and restore her physical strength during combat training. After all, when the demons came and swarmed them, only by relying on reasonable shifts and cooperation would they be able to survive on the battlefield.

This meant that while Phyllis was urging and luring the demonic beasts, Agatha would take the opportunity to rest some until several beasts had been gathered together... They took a quick break at noon, only eating dry food with snow for lunch. After Agatha managed to freeze three or four beasts, she would then shape the snow into a smooth ice track that would slide their captures to the Western Region's city wall.

As the sky dimmed and became grey, Leaf informed them that the competition had ended.

When they returned to the starting line, they were surprised to find that there were dozens of demonic beasts trapped in wooden cages. The number of caged demonic hybrid beasts had increased to around 30. The biggest one among them was a wolf-bear demonic hybrid. It was almost as tall as the wall, with limbs as

thick as stone pillars, and it was so strong that even a God's Punishment soldier and Devilbeast were unlikely to defeat it.

[Which team caught that one?]

Phyllis's face barely changed, even as feelings of loss flooded her. After all, they had done their best—22 small-sized and medium-sized demonic beasts, a score that she had thought would be high enough to stand out, but now it seemed that their score might be at the bottom.

How were the other two teams able to catch so many demonic beasts?

Wendy walked in front of them, relieved to see everyone safe, "You've all worked hard." Then she pulled out a notebook and began to announce the results.

"Neverwinter, seven points, well done."

[Wait... seven points?] Phyllis thought in shock. [Neverwinter isn't first? Could it be that the remaining 80 beasts were caught by the two members from the Sleeping Island?]

"It's all Maggie's fault," Lightning said, touching her forehead, "If she didn't leave halfway through, to steal eggs from the nest of a winter hawk and then spend two hours roasting them, we would have caught a few more."

"It was you who let me go coo..." the Pigeon perched on Lighting's head grumbled her grievance, "Not to mention, you ate more roasted eggs than me, what's more, you even wanted some Bird Beak Mushrooms, saying that eggs would taste better with mushrooms coo..."

"Nevermind, it's Okay as long as all of you come back safely... well, next is Sleeping Island, fifteen points. Ashes, you really are a fighter," Wendy continued.

"She just ran the captures for us," Andrea griped, "I was the one who knocked down the beasts. Too bad that we came across so few monsters on our way. Besides, she didn't run fast enough."

Ashes shot her a petulant look. "Why don't you try carrying those demonic boars back and forth, 15 times, in the snow?"

"Muscular barbarians are more suitable for this kind of job."

"They are better than someone so delicate and fragile."

"You—"

"Ahem," Wendy quickly interrupted the growing dispute, "the last is Taquila's team with a total of 22 points! Congratulations, the month's share of Chaos Drinks reward is now yours!"

"Ah, so enviable!" Andrea said begrudgingly.

"I want to drink that too coo..." Maggie eagerly looked at Agatha.

However, Phyllis was very startled, "There are clearly hundreds of cages containing demonic beasts..."

"Oh, Leaf caught them along the way," Wendy said waving her hand while smiling.

As the person in charge of the Witch Union said this, every participant automatically turned their eyes to the green-haired witch standing beside them.

Leaf touched the back of her head bashfully as she said, "I was afraid that there would be too many demonic beasts entering the hunting area, so I set a 3,000-foot radius trap on the outer-ring, only allowing some beasts to pass through specific passages. After that, I thought that since the beasts were already trapped in a vine trap, I could simply drag all of them to the edge of the forest and add more targets for His Majesty."

Suddenly, everyone fell silent.

Alone she had caught more beasts than the three competing teams combined. Moreover, she had done it while keeping watch over the competition. No one had ever considered that there would be a combat witch that powerful hiding among the higher ascendants in the Witch Union.

Even a Transcendent wouldn't be capable of catching so many demonic beasts within a day.

[Why do I feel unutterably depressed and overwhelmed...?]
Phyllis wondered to herself.

Suddenly, she felt that winning the competition wasn't as important.

The following day, Neverwinter finally finished all of the preparation necessary for the artillery exercise.

When Roland arrived at the West Wall, the top of the wall was packed with 2,000 citizens, in their sold-out seats, eagerly waiting to watch the exercise. According to Edith, 80% of the seat holders were former residents of Border Town. This clearly showed that spending two silver royals to participate in an activity, where the king was present, no longer posed a financial burden for the locals.

The Western Region's weather seemed to accommodate the exercise. After a long night of heavy snowfall, it had stopped at the break of dawn and the howling northern wind had eased as well. The vast field to the west of the city wall seemed to be covered with a layer of silver-white carpet. The rutted track marks and footprints left behind from carrying the demonic beasts had been covered by the snow, making the ground appear clean and untouched.

The Demonic beasts, being the targets, had undoubtedly caught the attention of the audience. The numerous captures had been divided into three rows, each aligned with one of the three firing distances; 1,000, 1,600, and 3,300 feet. The more brutal demonic hybrid beasts had been lined in the rows closest to the attendees. It was obvious that that being able to witness these mighty monsters being turned into a bloody pulp under the heavy artillery fire would bring them unparalleled enjoyment. A sweet revenge for the residents of Neverwinter who had suffered so much during the Months of Demons.

The smaller beasts were meant to be fodder for the embedded gunpowder. It was too far to see any details so it was just for embellishment. However, in Roland's opinion, the number of beasts was more important. In the last row, the cages that trapped demonic beasts lined up with a length up to 330 feet, waiting for the most resplendent blaze.

Iron Axe climbed up the wall and reported loudly, "Your Majesty, the artillery battalion for the First Army is ready."

Roland exhaled a white breath and turned around to look at Echo, who was standing beside him, "Play the Parade March Song."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

As the magic power spread from Echo's fingers, the familiar resonance instantly rang out across the wall. Even though Roland had heard this song before, since it was practiced over and over on the school's sports days, his heart still skipped a beat once the melody echoed in the air of Neverwinter. It was as if the song had

the power to bolster him as he waited for the soldiers' arrival.

The people who had been chatting were hushed and they all turned their eyes towards the end of the long street that was near the city wall. There they saw a team of soldiers, in uniform, marching up the street towards their positions in an orderly manner.

Roland remembered the first time he experienced the Months of Demons two years ago when the city had been like a palm-sized land. People with less than two months training had to fight against demonic beasts on the rubble-built cement wall with lances and spears. At that time, even a common demonic hybrid could put the Militia into a frenzy. However, now, they would remain calm and composed while faced with a higher level challenge. The seemingly powerful demonic beasts had now become the targets that will help to declare the strength of Neverwinter. The apparent contrast made Roland extremely excited.

As the soldiers slowly climbed up the wall through the gentle slopes, a euphoric applause broke out among the crowd, wave after wave, almost as if it would never stop. He knew that there was no need for him to make a speech at the moment, everyone was waiting expectantly for the melodious roar of artillery.

So, Roland just loudly announced, "Let the artillery exercise begin!"

Chapter 721: Artillery Exercise

Ferlin Eltek was quite surprised seeing the parade of the soldiers of the First Army climb up the wall in order.

Known as the star knight of the Western Region he was naturally familiar with the training of knights, and knew how difficult it was to ensure that people kept order while marching in a group. Whether for knights or mercenaries, when they were under a Lord's purview, their numbers in each row would be no more than five, for if the horizontal line became too long, it would be very easy to become disordered, giving the audience whose seats were far away the sight of a messy eyesore.

In general, the difficulty of keeping order increased exponentially with the number of soldiers. But in this group, the number of soldiers was over 100, with more than 10 soldiers in each column and row, and all of them were in uniforms of the same color with bright ribbons diagonally across their chests, making them look like a moving square.

This visual impact gave Ferlin an unstoppable momentum, once the formation was maintained, the advantage of keeping a large group became most incisive.

This could also be seen from the enthusiastic response of the crowds around him.

"Look at the third row. There is my boy!"

"They're marching in such good order!"

"All of them look like one person!"

"If two armies are confronting each other on the battlefield, I'm afraid that the enemies will be frightened out of their wits just by seeing this kind of formation."

"Ha, I think they'll be fleeing just on hearing the name of His Majesty."

"What's the name of this song?"

"I don't know, but... I feel full of strength!"

"That's the effect made by Miss Echo's magic power."

"It's a pity that May couldn't witness this," Irene said, holding the arm of Morning Light. "If she were here seeing it, she'd surely have been able to reproduce the exciting scene in the drama."

"She's pregnant. Of course, she can't stand on the city wall in the chilly wind with you," Ferlin shook his head and said with a smiling face. "Rest assured that you'll definitely get another chance. I bet there'll be more and more activities like this in the future."

Both the review of knights and artillery exercises were the means

for the lord to show his power. The current strength accumulated in Neverwinter was beyond everyone's imagination. There was no doubt that his Majesty was capable of conquering more territories. With such a troop, it would not be surprising that he could even take all of the four kingdoms under his dominion when the time came. Demonstrations like this one would be absolutely necessary in order to overawe the people.

"My dear, would you like to join this team?" Irene asked abruptly.

"What?" Morning Light was a little shocked.

"I can feel it," Irene said, smiling at him. "Your heart is beating fast."

"Is it..." Ferlin exhaled a white breath. He realized that even if his father did not say the words at that time, he would not be a teacher for his whole life.

Sir Eltek was right. If he really liked books, he would not have decided to be a knight at the very beginning and would not have done his best to earn the reputation, the well-known Morning Light.

The army was the best place for him.

He wanted to join the First Army and become His Majesty's sword, to fight for the king and to play a role in expanding the kingdom's territory to an unprecedented scale.

Although His Majesty had said that he, a knight who had surrendered, would have no chance to pick up a weapon again, there were other ways to join the First Army, according to his father.

He wondered to what extent His Majesty's Adviser Department had developed now.

He watched the artillerymen entering the shooting positions as if he had seen himself in the future.

...

The music stopped.

This was an indication to be ready for the firing.

Van'er gave the order to take aim.

Six Longsong Cannons that were set at the widened area of the city wall dropped the barrels to point at the cages 300 meters away—a distance to which shells would keep flying straight to the target without falling. Because it was uncertain whether the demonic beasts' bodies would trigger the fuze, they must keep the muzzles lower so that the shells would hit the snow under the cages.

"My God, this one is so ugly." Nelson whistled. The mortar team

he was in charge of was aiming at a large wolf-bear hybrid. The beast probably had felt a gloomy foreboding and was struggling to get rid of the shackles. The huge body crashed hard against the bars, making the cage shake constantly.

"Be serious," Van'er frowned and warned. "This isn't the usual training. Everyone is watching us."

"I'm a little nervous," Cat's Claw said, his voice a bit stiff. "Being stared at by so many people makes me want to pee..."

Many members at the scene shared the same feeling.

"Yeah, it's more uncomfortable than confronting the duke's knighthage before."

"If you miss the target, you'll be laughed at by all of the citizens."

"Just do it as you did in the previous exercise. No more nonsense!" Van'er shot Cat's Claw a glance, "Remember not to mistake the live shell with the headless shell. If something goes wrong, detention will be waiting for you. Now, load!"

After entering the loading process, everyone at the spot suddenly got busy. No matter how they felt now, they had been so familiar with the procedure after the long period of training that they would be able to complete it even with their eyes closed.

The loading of the 152-mm Longsong Cannon was much faster

than the twelve-pound field artillery cannon. After all of the six cannons were ready, Iron Axe's voice of countdown was heard from the top of the wall.

"Ten, nine, eight..."

At the same time, the noise of the audience came to an abrupt end, as if everyone was waiting for the moment when the muzzles burst out flames and thunder.

But Van'er was unexpectedly calm in his heart. Looking at the demonic beasts roaring crazily in the cages, he recalled the days four years ago when his younger brother had died of famine and cold in his arms, when he had practiced day and night for eating one more egg, when he had fought the demonic beasts on the rubble-built city wall with pikes.

The changes that had taken place in recent years were vivid before his eyes.

"Five, four, three..."

He had only been an ordinary miner in the old street of Border Town. He did not make up his mind to stay in the Militia to defend His Majesty's land against demonic beasts until His Majesty had said to him, "I have faith in you. Keep it up." But even so, he did not expect things to come to this state today.

Van'er secretly turned his head and looked at the gray-haired

man in the distance, Roland Wimbledon, who had made him calm. As long as His Majesty stood behind him, no matter what kind of enemy stood in front of him, he would not retreat.

"Two, one! Fire!"

"Fire!"

Van'er waved down his arm abruptly.

At the same time, six Longsong Cannons spewed out long flames and green smoke, accompanied by the huge boom that turned the snow on the wall into flying white mist. Within a blink of an eye, the shells shot across the distance of 300 meters. When people heard the deafening bombarding bang, the shells had dropped in front of the hybrid demonic beasts.

The compressed fuze triggered the double-base gunpowder in the warhead, blasting away six mud pillars in a flash and smashing the wooden cages—the beasts' seemingly sturdy bodies were like paper swirling in front of rampant waves. The flakes of wood mingled with hot and bloody flesh were flying straight up into the sky. Meanwhile, intestines and broken limbs scattered all around.

The crowds suddenly burst out fanatic cheers.

Chapter 722: Resplendent Blaze

According to Roland's plan, the firing would not stop once it had started.

The first, five rounds of the volley turned around 20 beasts, in the first row, into ashes. Then, in the free shooting time, the rapid firing, emptying ammunition, paired with the ignition of black powder, created a grand roaring momentum.

Thus, as the firing continued to ring out, the atmosphere created by this scene ushered in a new upsurge. The frequent blasts created a cloud of almost endless dust that made the surrounding 1,500-foot radius look like an impending doomsday. Occasionally a ricocheting stone would crush a cage and if the beast survived it would flee, choosing to run away, instead of rushing to the wall.

Fear had overridden their bloodthirsty instincts.

However, only a few would escape this land of the dead.

The strong waves radiating from underground had already begun to rupture their guts, deafen their ears, and blind their eyes. Most of the fleeing beasts did not make it far before they fell back to the ground, where they were devoured by the continuing explosives.

"This is nothing when compared to the war against the church," Andrea shouted while covering her ears, her face full of pride. The witches from Wolfheart stared at Andrea, eyes wide with shock. "At that time there were only two cannons, but we still had

hundreds of flintlock gun and iron cannons of a smaller sizes. The enemy wasn't demonic beasts in cages, but the men of God's Punishment Army who were fast and strong. At the moment when the battle was most fierce, the bullets were flying all around the entire battlefield. If anyone were to poke their head out from the cover they would definitely get themselves killed. That was a real battle."

Amy looked shocked, "Really?"

"No wonder the church lost the battle." Hero sighed, "It's beyond any human being's skills."

"Aren't you afraid of seeing such a scene?" Broken Sword looked admirably at Andrea.

Andrea smoothed down her billowing hair during an interval between the explosions and said, "Of course, you'll become accustomed to it after you've seen more. I have witnessed the whole process of a battle and personally killed two soldiers of the God's Punishment Army!"

She had completely forgotten that she had been as just shocked and astonished by the scenes of battle when she climbed up the city wall for the first time. It seemed that she now regarded Neverwinter as her second home and she couldn't even control her feeling of pride when she was talking about its weapons.

Most of the witches only stood there watching the show, however, Phyllis observed the events more carefully.

When the demonic beasts in the first row were bombarded, she didn't care too much—Mad Demons from this distance would also threaten the soldiers on the wall with their spears. When the common people were confronted with the bone spears, that dropped from above as violently as a Mighty Storm, how long would they be able to hold their defenses against the enemy even though their weapons, the so-called Longsong Cannon, were dramatically more powerful?

However, when they turned their fire to the second row of cages, her expression changed.

Was that the common king's reasoning for arranging the beasts in this manner? So he could gauge the cannon range? The last row of cages was over 3,000 feet from the wall. If the Longsong Cannon was able to hit that area, it meant that the cannon had a shooting range that rivaled that of the Siege Beasts', with a much higher lethality.

The Siege Beast had always been the most troublesome demon weapon for the Union. This weapon has a striking distance that is farther than any mangonel or ballista. Which made the witches have no choice but to rely on Transcendents to lead the Blessed Army to charge into the enemy's position. In this way, even if they succeeded in crushing the Siege Beasts, they would not be able to avoid a large number of casualties. However, if they had a long-range striking weapon like this, it wouldn't be impossible for them to successfully defend the Holy City of Taquila.

Phyllis wondered if this was the ultimate weapon of Neverwinter

as well as the reason why Agatha had such faith in Roland.

After she asked Ice Witch this question, she just shook her head and smiled.

"Setting the target 3,000 feet away was only to meet the needs of the audience... because a target further away would affect the view of the exercise. According to His Majesty, the shooting range for the new cannon was over six miles, ten times further than its present range," Agatha turned her head to whisper in Phyllis' ear, "In other words, it could hit somewhere out of the manipulator's sight."

Ten times? Phyllis was astonished. Although she did not quite understand what foot and mile meant, a distance that was ten times that of the current range could cover some of the demon's outposts. Did that mean, if the cannons were placed on the wall of Taquila the shells could directly hit the demons' lair?

How was that possible?

How could they ensure that the weapon would hit an enemy that's out of our view?

Agatha noticed her abstraction and continued to elaborate, "But, to hit a target so far away is not easy. It requires a lot of calculation and improvement of the aiming equipment, and I've heard that the astrologers are working on it. It appears that His Majesty intended to write a shooting range list from which they will be able to calculate the location where the shell will hit on the basis of the

pre-launch data. Through this method, the shell should hit the enemy precisely, even if it is thousands of feet away."

"Are you sure?" Phyllis clenched her teeth. "Doesn't that mean that as long as we make a few more cannons, the demons won't even be able to get near the city wall?"

"Yeah, His Majesty said that this kind of strike would be called a scrubbing..." Agatha shrugged and said, "probably a name pulled from the idea of 'scrubbing' dirty things on the ground. It's a little hard to pronounce but it sounds very appropriate."

Phyllis hesitated for a second before whispering close to Agatha's ear, "Er... Can you make the cannons?"

Agatha looked at her for a moment and waited for a new round of explosions to pass before saying, "I know what you are asking. I did provide some of the materials in the shell, however, it takes way more than two people to make it."

"Even witches?"

"Far from enough... Do you know how many common people work in the chemical plant of Neverwinter? Nearly 2,000 people and the number is still growing!" Agatha sighed, "But, what they do there is no more than make explosives from acids, greases, and gases, while the production of a cannon is a completely different system. The necessary mine and smeltery have more than 3,000 people working in them, the processing plant has over 1,500 workers, and corresponding technicians to maintain and operate

the finished product. How many common people do we have that could work for us even in the Taquila age?"

Phyllis became silent. After Arrieta and Starfall City fell, one after the other, the human beings' territory retreated to the corner of the plains with a plummeting population. By the time Taquila became the last shelter for all people, the number of the common people controlled by the Union was a mere 30,000 to 40,000. However, they were playing the role of supporting the combat witches, logistics, and keeping the city on course etc., it would be impossible to find enough people to manufacture the Longsong Cannons. If Agatha didn't lie to her, even the witches of Taquila at that time were unable to make it, let alone the ones who had been struggling to survive in the underground maze.

Suddenly, the booms from the cannons stopped.

The demonic beasts, in the first two rows, had completely merged with the snow, turning into puddles of blurred flesh and blood. An unearthly silence hung over the wall and no one there spoke. Everyone was staring at the furthest cages as if they were waiting for something.

Phyllis looked quizzically at Agatha, who just smiled back at her.

"Key is coming."

Before Agatha finished speaking, a bright light radiated from the ground, glimmering like a shining sun!

Chapter 723: Power to Shake the Sky

There was no sun in the Months of Demons, which was something that had not changed for thousands of years.

The sky was always like a gloomy dark curtain where the snow was invariably flying and swirling in the wind. People barely noticed the difference in the weather other than the intensity of the snow. Like the weather today, that only one or two occasional snowflakes drifted down might be regarded as a sign that the snow had stopped. Most of the time, the white snow would swarm the entire sky, the heavy fall of snow would float and cover the whole land at all times.

Therefore, this white light was particularly eye-catching under such a background. The moment it broke out of the earth, the glow brightened the surrounding snow in an instant, as if the entire gray world was lit up slightly.

Phyllis could not help but hold her breath.

Her gaze was fixed on the light in this moment when everything seemed swift and yet slow.

As the light dimmed quickly and turned into an orange fireball, the ground 1,000 meters away from the wall was rooted up!

This was not an illusion. She clearly saw the flat snowfield rising upwards and forming a soft arc as if the land under the snow was not made of soil and rocks, but made of water that could randomly

change its shape. At the top of the arc, the red fireball was rising as if it wanted to get rid of the shackles of the earth.

It succeeded! The next scene happened almost in the blink of an eye. Smoke and clouds of dust and flames erupted from the ground and tore the curved surface into pieces! The fireball skyrocketed, along with billows of black smoke rising tens of meters high, spreading a high wall that almost obscured the original light of the sky in Phyllis' vision. Both the cages and demonic beasts turned into ashes in front of the fireball. By then the earth-shattering roar came to her ears, making her tremble and her heart thud.

"Boom! Boom!"

Suddenly, the earth shook!

Phyllis subconsciously clutched Agatha, to whom she moved her lips and wanted to say something but was blocked by the coming airflow. The people on the city wall also reeled from the blowing and did not come to themselves until a long while later. They, stunned by this scene, had forgotten to cheer and applaud. The only thing they could do was look up at the rising wall of smoke.

"Is this... Key?"

Swallowing, she had never thought that common people had mastered such a terrible force nowadays. Even a Senior Demon could not survive in such a turbulent underground fire.

The red sun was dimming, leaving only a few scarlet flames looming in the dark smoke, but the billowing smoke had shot up to midair as if it connected the clouds. The specks of dirt and demonic beasts' pieces that had been blown up into the sky now dropped like a rain of blood and dirt in the surrounding snowfield.

Looking at this scene, Phyllis finally understood where Agatha's confidence came from.

With this earthshaking power, common people would even have the opportunity to contend with brutal demons.

But she still could not understand why Roland Wimbledon would call it art.

"Was the explosion art?" She wondered.

...

Retnin was completely intoxicated by the cold wind that was filled with the smoke of gunpowder. The boom of the blast thoroughly awakened his desire.

This was chemistry!

This was the real chemistry!

He looked to his companions beside him, the former Chief

Alchemist of King's City, Rayleigh, along with Archer, whose eyes, he noticed, were shining with the same light, which was irreconcilable with their aging looks. He vaguely remembered that last time he showed this kind of radiance was when he was enrolled in the Alchemic Workshop as a disciple at the age of 10.

Retnin felt that he finally found the goal to which he would devote his whole life.

That was to attract everyone's attention like the sun,

only chemistry could help him achieve this goal!

Unfortunately, he was nearly 50 years old. How nice it would be if he had seen this scene 20 years earlier and understood the real power of chemistry ahead of time, which was not flames and fumes given off from the burning of rough snow powders but the purer light and heat.

Fortunately, he finally knew it.

Looking at the stunned astrologers beside him, Retnin could not help smiling.

Since then, the lore of Sage would only record one name, while the other would soon be forgotten completely.

He wanted to let everyone experience the power of explosions, to make them praise the greatness of chemistry!

He could not hold back his urge to start more experiments. He had so many chemically explosive plans in "Intermediate Chemistry" to try.

"What are we waiting for?"

"Let's apply for a lab from Kyle Sichi."

"That's what I'm thinking."

The three alchemists spoke out their ideas and suggestions at the same time.

Retnin gave the column of smoke that lingered in midair one last look and then walked swiftly towards the laboratory.

...

"Now do you understand why I want you to stay in Neverwinter?" Edith fumbled Cole's head.

The latter was silent for a long time before asking in a husky voice, "For this?"

Clearly, he was really frightened by the formidable force of the explosion, with his face still being pale and one hand clutching his sister's arm.

"For no one can withstand Roland Wimbledon." Edith said slowly, "The aristocrats, though holding their titles and lands, mean nothing compared with this kind of power. He would make a kingdom in any way he wants it to be. When he ordered the abolition of the nobility, those aristocrats should have handed over their lands and rights. But it's a pity that most people still haven't realized it."

Although she regarded it as a pity, the Pearl of the Northern Region showed no expression of pity, rather she showed a feeling of gloating.

Cole Kant pouted his lips. "We... are aristocrats too."

"But we're no longer titled aristocrats." Edith said, taking her younger brother to the edge of the wall. Now that people were gradually leaving the city wall and the area had become much more spacious, Cole could clearly see the dark burned ground far away as if it had been ploughed severely. Edith continued to say, "Aristocrats are respected for their wealth and power, not the pieces of land under their feet, which means the nobility won't truly disappear. Just like this plain, whether its surface is broken or neat, snow-covered or grassy, its nature won't change. Neverwinter is the starting point of the new era. If you want to be an aristocrat in this era, you have to integrate yourself into the new rules set by His Majesty."

For a moment, Cole felt he had seen and not seen the point at the same time, but he still nodded under his sister's commanding manner accumulated over the years. "I'll stay here and no longer

argue for going back to the Northern Region."

"That's right. Don't you think it's far more interesting in exploring new rules and new forces than running pieces of immutable land?"

Cole looked up at her sister's pretty profile.

Her long hair was blowing, like the silkiest satin, in the northerly wind. Her long, narrow eyelashes tilted up, accented with her elegant curve of nose and lips, giving a sight of unspeakable beauty.

The only thing that puzzled him was the flush on Edith's face, something that women would have when they were excited.

"Is my sister interested in the skyrocketing column of smoke?" Cole doubted.

Cole turned away his eyes, hiding his doubt deeply in his heart.

Chapter 724: A Higher Level of Power

After the exercise, Phyllis once again came to Roland's castle accompanied by Agatha.

When they entered the office, she noticed that Roland Wimbledon wore the same expression as he had last time. He did not show any self-satisfaction, as if the exercise was nothing but an insignificant matter in his eyes.

However, Phyllis felt that the importance of this common person sitting behind the mahogany table had apparently grown a lot. She unconsciously addressed him with honorifics. "Your Majesty, please allow me to ask you a few questions before contacting the Taquila witches."

"Go ahead." Roland nodded.

"Can the weapons you demonstrated be mass-produced?"

In Phyllis' view, if the plan of seeking the Chosen One did not work out well, the war against demons would undoubtedly last many years. If the production of this weapon really required nearly 10,000 common people and the output could not meet their needs, Neverwinter would still be faced with a hard war.

By that time, she would be able to strive for more positions for the Taquila survivors.

After all, a force of about 100 God's Punishment Warriors controlled by witches was definitely formidable. When the Longsong Cannons could not stop the Siege Beasts that came from all directions, Roland would have to rely on them to break through the tight encirclement.

Roland smiled and gave the answer. "The first thing I must point out is that the Longsong Cannon isn't merely a defensive weapon. It may look too heavy to be carried by manpower or livestock, but for some vehicles, carrying them is no longer a problem. In fact, with a little improvement, it can turn into a weapon that can be used for both offense and defense."

"Ve... Vehicles?" Phyllis repeated. She had heard from Agatha earlier that His Majesty often said some awkward-sounding new words, most of which were straightforward, and that if she did not understand, she could ask directly. Generally, the king would be very happy to answer the questions.

As expected, Roland rubbed his hands and said, "It would be anything that can carry the cannons, such as, the simplest... three-masted big sailing ship, which can be regarded as a vehicle."

"But suchlike big ships can only sail in the Swirling Sea."

"I'm just giving you an example. There will be a free-wheeling vehicle on land in the future. Neverwinter has already embarked on developing such a vehicle, though it can do much more than simply carrying a cannon."

"An equipment that is capable of carrying such a heavy weapon as well as moving freely on the ground? But from the king's statement, it seems not to be prepared for cannons specifically." Just as Phyllis wanted to ask some more, Roland went on, "As for the output, after a new generation of processing tools is commonly used, I believe the cannons will cover all the walls of the border in a year or two."

Phyllis secretly gasped at the answer. "Covering all the walls of the border in a year or two? Even Mangonel and Ballista cannot be produced in such a large number in such a short period of time."

"If so, it will be hard for the Taquila survivors to play a role here."

To Phyllis, it was an answer that disappointed and satisfied her at the same time. Perhaps their positions would be lower than other witch organizations, but, it was always good to have less casualties in war.

However, in light of her previous experiences, she decided not to question him but rather to change the subject.

"I understand, Your Majesty. My second question is, I noticed during the artillery exercise that the last explosion was not caused by the Longsong Cannon, I'm wondering if it's your most lethal weapon?"

When she asked, Phyllis noticed a strange smile appear on Roland's face before he answered. "Judging from the technology

we've mastered, it can only be counted as the simplest one."

"The simplest... one?" she said in astonishment. "You can make a weapon that could create a more violent explosion?"

"There's no end in the development of explosion." Roland shook his head. "The current level of weaponry Neverwinter possesses can be viewed as the second level, the third level will be better. At that level, it won't be impossible to burn a city into the ground in one go."

Phyllis was completely startled. She instinctively wanted to consider this statement as nonsense. "Crush a city in one go? No common people or witches can have this kind of power. Only deities can do it." But when she saw Roland's peculiarly shining eyes, she found it hard to deny what he had said.

In the end, she had no choice but to ask in a low voice, "What kind of weapon is that?"

Roland did not give a direct answer. He drank some tea before saying slowly, "What does the scene of the last round of explosion look like in your eyes?"

"Is this about my doubts?" She closed her eyes and a moment later said, "Like a sunrise."

If the smoke and dust were taken as clouds, the rising orange fireball would undoubtedly be the sunrise at dawn.

"Yes, it's just like the red light of the early morning sun. But the third level of weapon is the real sun." Roland raised the corner of his lip, as if he was narrating a thing made by God, "You can't look straight at it because it'll burn your eyes, neither can you come too close to it, for the glittering light will burn you all over. Its core temperature can turn stones into gases, and the air billow it generates is strong enough to smash houses."

The description made Phyllis shudder. She was unable to distinguish whether what he was saying was an overestimation or the truth. "How can we make it?" she asked.

"We have to accomplish two epic tasks. One is called resplendent radiance, while the other is called the distance to the sun, and..."

"Your Majesty!" Agatha interrupted him, frowning.

"Please don't talk nonsense at this time." Nightingale's voice also came to Phyllis' ears.

"Epic tasks? Resplendent radiation?" Phyllis found herself unable to understand even one word and Agatha was shrugging helplessly.

"Ahem, in short, it's very complicated, so I need more witches to push forward the research and speed up the technological development in Neverwinter." Roland coughed a little. "Of course, the things you found in the ruin may be helpful, so I hope we can start a deeper negotiation as soon as possible."

With a complicated feeling, Phyllis looked at the king, who was a common person, before taking off the ring on her finger. "As promised, I'll contact Pasha and other survivors for you. When I crush this Five-Colored Stone, they'll sense my location, but if you want to talk directly, I'm afraid it'll take one or two more days... I don't know when Pasha can get a magic core ready."

"Can we have a conversation anywhere?"

"Yes, but if the condition permits, a spacious place will be much better."

"Well then, you can crush the Magic Stone in the hall, that will make it a little formal." Roland said before he turned to Agatha and said, "You take her there for me."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

After leaving the office, Phyllis took a deep breath.

She had done all she could do, next was to wait for the response from the rest of the survivors.

Chapter 725: Bet And Promise

The effect of the live-fire artillery exercise exceeded Roland's expectations.

He had indeed got what had paid for. In the last round of explosion, he had ignited 70% of the total black powder reserves and had got an explosion as intense as that of the roadside bombs in the modern world where he had lived before. While the soldiers had been burying the powder, he had had a sudden thought and had mixed some aluminum powder with the gunpowder. As a result, the fireball of the explosion had become even more bright. The moment it had shot out of the ground, it had looked a bit like the rising sun.

With the success of this explosion, the First Army's explosives had been officially upgraded from black powder to chemical gunpowder. As for the nuclear explosives, he could only fantasize about it at this moment. There was quite a lot of uranium in the earth's crust, which was even more than silver and gold. He could have simply asked Lucia to collect uranium, but he was unable to prevent radiation damage from nuclear fallout or manufacture qualified lead plates.

The most important thing was that he didn't know whether Nana could heal radioactive diseases, namely, the biological deformation in genes caused by particle ionization.

So unless he was left with no choice, Roland did not plan to start the "Bright Radiation", a task as epic as the mythical stealing of fire.

After all, it was too dangerous.

After settling the issue of the Taquila witches' meeting, he invited Tilly into his office.

It was time to discuss the bet with her.

Roland poured her a cup of Chaos Drink, cleared his throat, and said, "About the hunting competition...."

"Even though Agatha is a member of the Witch Union, her team didn't represent the Neverwinter city." Tilly seemed to have already guessed Roland's thoughts and narrowed her eyes. "Brother, our bet can only be considered as a draw. I won't accept it if you intend to count Leaf as part of the Neverwinter team."

"Of course, our bet did end in a draw. But I still want you to stay," Roland said honestly.

His straightforward attitude made Tilly stutter, "Ugh...."

"So, how about we count it as a double win?" This was the first time that he saw Princess Tilly's speechless expression, which was actually rather adorable in his eyes. "I'll use one-third of the profits of Chaos Drink as a fund to reward anyone, a witch or a common person, who contributes to the Neverwinter city. And you can take up residence in the Neverwinter city, either in the Witch Building or somewhere else together with the Sleeping Island witches."

As they started discussing business, Tilly soon regained her focus and coughed as if nothing had happened, "Only one third? We had initially agreed on half of the profits."

"Because I estimated that even one-third of the profit would still be a shocking amount. It'll be enough for one lifetime." Roland explained, "The rest of the money will be used for the Neverwinter city's infrastructure, including the witches accommodation and necessary facilities, as well as salary distribution. In general, it'll be used for all the needed areas. If you need more, you can directly take it."

"Even if I spend all the earned gold royals?"

"Of course, they would be wasted anyway in the warehouse if left unused," he replied naturally. In the future, when the metallic currency was no longer able to meet the productivity needs, it would be the time to start using credit currency. When that happened, the gold royals would become just a number for the government, which would print out the money directly. Given that, storing metallic money was not important for him.

Tilly smirked, "Sounds like a good deal."

"That's why it's called a double win," Roland said, "don't you think?"

She sighed and said, "Since you already spoke your mind so clear, I can only agree with you." Even though she acted like she was

reluctantly agreeing, her smiling eyes could not hide her real feelings.

Roland could not help but smile too. He had only seen a look of suspicion on her face one year ago, but now she put on a relaxed smile. It seemed like she finally believed that he could bring a stable and comfortable life for the witches.

"Oh right." After some casual chatting, he wanted to change the topic and focused on the retrieval of the Southernmost Region. "I plan to integrate the Sand Nation's domain into the Kingdom of Graycastle this coming winter. Their traditions and power inheritance methods are very different from the ones in the Four Kingdoms. Thus, I need your help to completely conquer it."

Next, Roland described to her the laws and holy duel ceremony of the Sand Nation.

"I don't have a problem with Ashes joining the duel." Tilly said after thinking for a while. "But why do you want to integrate the desert? Since the Kingdom of Graycastle was established, no ancestor had ever shown any interest in that land."

"It only looks deserted, but the underground fire that has never been extinguished for the past dozens of years and the plain covered by white salt are all proofs of the hidden treasures of that land." Roland waved his hand. "If I'm not mistaken, Southernmost Region will be an indispensable part in the future development of Neverwinter."

"In that case, I'll explain to Ashes." Tilly did not ask for more details but nodded in accordance.

Nowadays, the trust between them was slowly increasing. It was obvious that in the future, the Witch Union and the Sleeping Island witches would have a close relationship.

Roland was very pleased as he thought about that.

...

After sending his sister away, he immediately called Echo.

The holy duel could only earn the right of speech for him, but it was not a long-term solution. He did not just need a clan's right to live in the Iron Sand City, but numerous Mojin people that would follow him. For this, he had to become the legendary great chief.

Roland did not have the time to lead the army personally, so he had to find a representative.

As the princess of the Osha clan, Echo was a key figure in persuading the Mojin people.

"I wonder if Iron Axe has discussed with you about returning to the Southernmost Region?" he said directly, "this winter the First Army will enter and station in the Iron Sand City, and I wish you'll go there on my behalf."

"No....he didn't mention anything," Echo looked surprised, then bit her lips and said with a sad expression, "Your Majesty, don't you want me anymore?"

Hearing her first sentence, Roland was happy to know that Iron Axe understood that any military action was the kingdom's secret and had not mentioned anything about it even to his own clan member. However, her last words almost made him choke. Even though he knew what she actually meant, still, those words could be easily misunderstood. At the same time, he felt a cold breath behind him, and Nightingale's hand firmly pinched his arm, "Of course not, this is temporary—once I become the great chief of the Sand Nation, you can return with Iron Axe to the Neverwinter city. I won't force you if you don't want to."

Hearing that, Echo relaxed, "I understand, but the holy duel won't be enough to subdue all the Mojin people."

"Of course, I've another plan," Roland laughed and then slowly described it to her.

"This...." Echo was shocked and expressed her disbelief. "Can this... really be done?"

"Definitely, I'm the king of Graycastle, I give you my word," he said emphatically.

"By the name of Three Gods, the Sand Nation will never forget your kindness." She was not hesitating anymore, but instead she

knelt and bowed respectfully, "Echo is willing to complete this task for you."

"Very good," Roland stood up to help the Mojin girl who had suffered a lot to rise. "I'm counting on you."

In this way, the preparations for the retrieval of the Southernmost Region were completed.

Chapter 726: Tide of Demonic Beasts

In the depths of the maze-like cave, the tremor above their heads grew louder and louder.

Pasha knew that they were quickly approaching with unstoppable numbers.

She stretched her tentacles into the soil and rose above ground, where she "saw" everything that was happening outside the mountain—the dark mass of demonic beasts were rampaging between the mountains and all of the entrances to the maze ruins were blocked by Fearful Beast of Hells. The demonic hybrids behind them were furiously tearing apart the flesh and bones of the beasts until they could open up a space between them—they had no choice, or else they would be crushed to death by the rest of the demonic beasts behind them at the cave entrance.

Despite the desperate struggle of the hybrids, the passage would soon be blocked once again by the flood of demonic beasts and the only way to get through was to repeat the previous actions. This had resulted in a bloodbath in front of the entrances before the demonic beasts even launched their attack at the core area.

Chaos ensued underground as the Wilderness Beasts crawled around within the different layers of the earth. Their head full of tentacles could easily sense the weaker parts of the ground, and the oil-like substance on its skin allowed it to burrow through the ground effortlessly, carrying within its long tube-like body a large number of demonic hybrids. Once a monster like that broke through the defensive line, it would often incur a massive amount

of casualties within the ranks of the defenders.

Even some mutated Flying Beasts had appeared in the sky, but they could only hover in the air as they were unable to enter the underground ruin.

This was an unfathomable experience. She did not directly witness the scene unfold in front of her, but whether it was the shrieks coming from above the mountains, the tremors within the layers of the earth, or the sounds of rock and soil mashing together, they were all accurately transmitted into her mind through the thousands of tentacles, forming countless vivid images.

This was the largest scale invasion of the demonic beasts since the beginning of this winter.

Pasha withdrew her limbs and descended to an even deeper layer below.

From time to time, some loose clumps of dirt would fall from the ceiling and smash into the braziers at the sides of the passage—she did not need the flames to see every single stone in the ground, but those who had turned into God's Punishment Soldiers did need them. She extinguished the flames in the braziers on her way back when everyone had already moved to the maze hall.

"How's the situation above?"

As she entered the hall, she heard Alethea's voice in her head.

"The closest Wilderness Beast to us has reached the third layer," Pasha transmitted her words to everyone's consciousness, "How's the situation below the maze?"

"There is nothing unusual," Alethea replied, "I only saw some charred black corpses."

Pasha's perception and understanding of fighting had changed dramatically since her body's transformation. The originally flat world had suddenly become three-dimensional, and since their enemies were able to move freely in the ground, the survivors had to keep an eye out for the situation beneath them—As long as they were not standing at the end of the abyss, they should not ignore the deeper hidden threats.

Fortunately, a lava river flowed endlessly beneath the ruin, which sealed the larger part of the bottom of the maze and thus spared them a lot of effort. Up until now, there has not been a demonic beast that was not afraid of fire.

"How long before the Instrument of Divine Retribution is ready?" Pasha looked at Celine.

"I don't know. Half an hour, maybe one hour?" the latter replied anxiously from the magic core's direction, "I've tried my best, but the damaged position in area 43 has just been repaired and Lady Eleanor needs more time to calculate the core!"

"Don't worry. They won't arrive that fast," she calmed her, "The bigger demonic hybrids will be blocked outside of the cave entrances and we'll only have to handle the smaller ones."

"You're right. We can just treat it as daily training," Elena said, "as long as we're here, the demonic beasts will not be able to enter the hall."

"I don't think it may have been the best idea to retrieve the relic of gods so early. Wouldn't it be better to have let Starfall City consume a bit more of their strength?" Someone asked.

"They would still have to defend Hermes. But without the God's Punishment Army, those common people are worthless." Alethea refuted her.

"The walls can effectively block the demonic beasts, and the hot oil and mangonels can also give those beasts a good beating. We would just need to stay hidden in the Pivotal Secret Temple and wait for a break in the city's defenses to retrieve the relic."

"There are many traps hidden under the cathedral. What if the enemies accidentally triggered such a trap? We would have been buried alive, which is still nothing compared to the relic falling into the hands of the demons. No matter what, we can't afford to risk it."

"Stop bickering," Pasha interrupted, "Since we've already brought the relic back, we no longer have a choice but to continue with the plan. Have you already forgotten Lady Natalya's words before the

attack on the Queen of Starfall City?"

After she spoke, the others were immediately silenced, all quietly agreeing with her.

During the age of Taqila, scenes like this were rare. The low-level witches had to obey their superiors unconditionally, and anyone who broke the rules would receive severe punishment. The Union's largest-ever conflict was the one between Natalia and Alice. Before Natalia cut all ties with Starfall City, she said those words to all her followers and then initiated the sneak attack on the Queen of Starfall City.

Since that day, the survivors of Taqila no longer held rankings in mind, and thus internal disputes became more frequent. However, Pasha did not mind this change at all—compared to the previously rigid system, she actually preferred an organization full of energy.

Just as the others changed the subject and started to discuss ways to block the demonic beasts, Pasha suddenly received an unexpected signal from one of her tentacles!

A violent tremor sounded through the earth as if a heavy object experiencing free fall crashed into the ground without any resistance. It quickly broke through several layers of the maze, and is now fast approaching the depths of the hall!

How can this be possible?

The ground was densely packed with soil and stones, not allowing any large movements and even a Wilderness Beast would take at least half an hour to drill through a layer. How was it able to move so fast through the ground?

Pasha quickly moved more of her tentacles to the direction of the movement—the more tentacles she used to watch an area, the more "pictures" she would receive.

Then, her heart sunk.

A horizontal crack of six to seven miles had suddenly appeared in that area, splitting the ground into two. It looked like a long chasm that stretched all the way to the darkest depths. A wild beast was just crawling down the soft soil along the hill, tumbling down straight towards the hall.

"Prepare to fight" Pasha warned at full volume to everyone through their consciousness, "At the direction of the magic core!"

Suddenly, while everyone was still in shock, the ceiling of the main hall exploded into pieces, and a long-necked Wilderness Beast slipped down through the gap, covered with scratches and bruises, emitting a sinister dark blue light due to the influence of the magic core. It had sustained massive damage from the crash, but even so, it completed its mission with its dying breath.

The moment the beast fell to the ground, several hybrid demonic beasts tore out of its belly and lunged towards the nearest victim, Celine.

Chapter 727: The Instrument of Divine Retribution

"No—!" Pasha screamed at the top of her voice.

Right after Celine took out the tentacle out of the Instrument of Divine Retribution and knocked two demonic hybrids down, she was bitten by another demonic beast. Her cumbersome blob-like body instantly cracked open. Scales and gray body liquid gushed out and splashed all over the place. Several sneaky mutated wolf species even crept up her coarse skins and clambered to her head, in an attempt to bite her main tentacles on the top.

The other witches all unsheathed their swords and came to her rescue. Springing up like a streak of silver light, Elena was the fastest one. She struck a demonic hybrid who came to block her way and slashed it in half. Afterwards, she dashed into the crowd of demonic beasts and slew fiercely. The beasts' blue blood spilled behind her. Apparently, these monsters, which scared common people so much, were as impotent as normal beasts in front of these God's Punishment Witches who were as powerful as Extraordinaries. Even in the start of this fight when the beasts had still been in their prime, they had apparently not been in a prevailing position in terms of speed or power.

As more witches joined the battle, demonic beasts were slaughtered one by one. After the short chaos came to an end at last, Pasha withdrew all her tentacles and rushed to the center of the hall, heart in her throat.

Unlike a God's Punishment Witch who could easily switch her

body. They, unfortunately, were stuck in the blob they had entered without an option to switch to a new one. Once their bodies were on the brink of shutting down, they would have no choice but to merge with Lady Eleanor.

Pasha was completely satisfied with her fate. After she had resolved to follow Lady Natalya, she was prepared to sacrifice herself anytime. But Celine could not end up like this. Among all the survivors, she had done more research than anybody else on the magic core. If she was merged by the central carrier, nobody would be able to reboot the Instrument of Divine Retribution until a considerable amount of time. It would be perilous for everybody in the Months of Demons when danger constantly lurked around.

"Are you OK?" asked Pasha anxiously, who landed next to the blob covered with wounds and scratches.

"Well... not bad." Celine's answer relieved Pasha instantly. "I'll be fine as long as the holes in my body are blocked. The problem lies in my tentacles. Several of them are broken and it's awfully painful."

"You shall find yourself lucky to still be able to sense pains... I yearn to feel them again." One voice complained.

"Exactly. If Phyllis hears you say that, she'll be jealous. Poor Phyllis. She can only take solace spiritually now."

"Don't say that. She was sent to serve ordinary people for the sake of Taquila." Elena frowned.

"She's now called No. 76, isn't she? I wonder how the plan of the Chosen One goes at the moment."

"It has been only a short time. The Union no longer dominates the whole continent these days. It'll take us at least another two or three years to complete the mission since we can't even reach those hidden witches that easily."

"Or wait until the Army of Demons besieges and defeats us at the arrival of the Bloody Moon." Another voice put in.

"Damn, do you really want to say that like we don't know?"

Everybody burst into laughter at this remark.

"Shut up, all of you. We're still in danger." Alethea grunted. "What should we do? There's a hole in the ceiling. If there's one fallen beast, there'll be another. Shall we split up and leave some of us here at the bottom of the cave?"

Pasha contemplated for a while and made an objection. "No. If the fallen demonic beast fights with the witches who stay here only, then that won't be a problem. What if they turn around to attack the outer defense line? In that case, people who guard the entrances will be besieged. Even if we're as strong as God's Punishment Warriors, it'll still put us in a very difficult position."

Elena gave an approving nod. "I agree with Pasha. We'll be easily

split up and surrounded. By then, we'll have nowhere to retreat. I bet it would be better for us to stay close together than separate. Let's gather at the center of the hall to guard the relic and the core. Once the Instrument of Divine Retribution is repaired, we'll all be able to stay alive."

"I agree."

"So do I."

"At any rate, this sounds better than being bitten by a demonic beast from the back."

"Then let's do it." Pasha swayed her tentacles. "Abandon the bottom floor and focus on the defense of the magic core."

That meant they would have to confront the hybrid demonic beasts that swarmed in at the center of the hall. Without a doubt, there was going to be a fierce battle ahead of them. Fortunately, strong, gigantic Fearful Beasts of Hell and flying species that no defense could effectively ward off could not penetrate the maze; otherwise, the situation would be much worse.

Pasha felt a little distressed. The number of the demonic beasts was astonishing, but they God's Punishment Witches were not possessed of incessant physical strength. If the Instrument of Divine Retribution could not be repaired in a short period of time, Pasha feared that they could not hold up for very long with so many monsters swarming in.

If she had known this would happen, she should not have allowed Celine to continue with the test of the cores in the Months of Demons, at least not this most important one.

An hour later, demonic beasts appeared at the bottom floor of the maze, and the battle officially began.

All the witches fought at their best. Beyond a doubt, the result of this battle would determine whether human beings were able to survive. Pasha also joined the fight. She drew lava from the lava river and sprayed on demonic hybrids' heads. Scorching, slimy red water set the monsters' furs afire. Flames flared out. The air was heavy with a burning smell.

In spite of this, the monsters still continued to swarm in and darted toward where the relic was located. The God's Punishment Witches soon formed a wall of flesh and blood to stop them. For God's Punishment Witches, as long as their skulls were not injured, they would never truly die. As such, the battle was a bitter one. Some witches were terribly bitten, but they still managed to chop off their enemies' legs and rip them open while struggling on the ground.

Just at this critical moment, Celine's thrilled voice reached everybody. "The core calculation is completed! The magic power mode has switched to the foreign species annihilation mode. The Instrument of Divine Retribution is ready to go!"

"Pasha, I'll take care of the matter here. You go activate it now!" Alethea ejected a mouthful of lava and forced one of the demonic beasts nearby to retreat. She rushed to the front to cover Pasha.

Among all the survivors, Pasha's key was the biggest and strongest among the keys that could activate the instrument. It was second only to Lady Eleanor's.

Pasha nailed her main tentacle into the slate and sprang up. In a second, she was next to the Instrument of Divine Retribution. She stuck out all her tentacles and tightly wrapped around the spindle-shaped core suspending in the air. Instantly, her magic power streamed from her body, and the gleam of the instrument frame started to become increasingly bright as well.

Pasha could sense her magic power gradually condensed into a strange, semi-transparent polyhedron at the center of the spindle. The polyhedron looked very complicated, with numerous facets and edges, almost ineffable. Pasha realized that this was the core to annihilate foreign species. It worked the same way as the magic representation of Senior Witches, except it was much more powerful. When the ghostly black-blue light turned blinding pure white, the frame of the spindle opened abruptly and lit up the center of the hall, making it as bright as day!

"Right Now!" Celine yelled.

Pasha ordered the other witches to apply their abilities. A pale blue lightwave immediately escaped from the core and rippled around the hall. Within a blink, the lightwave reached every corner of the hall!

Chapter 728: A Surprising Communication

When the lightwave went through her body, Pasha felt a queer pulling force disquiet the little magic power left in her body, as though the magic power was going to be hauled away.

The magic power deprivation only lasted for a few seconds before peace was restored. In the meantime, the hall also fell silent as the magic power was tranquilized.

Through the short tentacles on her back, Pasha could see that the hybrid demonic beasts in the area reached by the lightwave all stiff like a statue as if they had been petrified. They then fell to the floor without uttering a sound.

It was evidently the most efficient massacre. Nothing, not even soil, rocks or brick walls, could possibly stop the wrath of heaven from advancing. Pasha could imagine what the upper floor of the maze looked like even without actually seeing it. There should be piles of hybrid demonic beasts lying dead like swarms of insects. Their magic power, which was their lifeline, would disperse in no time. Without the support of magic power, their mutated bodies would immediately lose the ability to move.

Of course, there would be a few less mutated ordinary demonic beasts with meager magic power surviving the slaughter, but these unintelligent monsters could no longer pose a threat to the relic.

This time, Celine had finally managed to repair the instrument in a timely fashion.

Pasha pulled out the tentacle breathlessly. She looked at Alethea and said, "Go check the upper floor." Then she came to Elena and asked, "Are you holding up well?"

Elena was covered with black and blue blood, half of her arm gone, her hair drenched in sweats as though she had just been dragged out of a river. "I'm fine. Everyone's alive."

Pasha breathed a long sigh of relief.

Looking around, she saw the witches who were still able to move were in a defense mode with their shields in their hands. As to the exhausted ones, they all sprawled across the floor, in hopes of recovering their strength as soon as possible.

Although they had just undergone a fierce battle, they did not look weary or despair by any means. Instead, they all grinned and waved at her, appearing to be pretty relaxed. Apparently, everybody shared the same thought. They viewed every battle as their last one. Even if they had to devote everything to Taquila, they did not regret a bit.

The scene almost brought Pasha to tears. She felt a gust of warmth slowly crept into her heart like a hot spring.

Every witch was equally important. Over the past 400 years, no new witches had joined them, and they had developed an inseparable bond among each other. Nothing could be better than hearing that everyone was alive.

"I have to change to a new body though." Elena sighed. "It took me a long time to find this one. I don't know if there will be any new bodies stronger and more good-looking than this one."

"..." Pasha did not know whether to laugh or to cry. It was definitely not a good time to discuss this kind of matter. She tapped Elena's head with her tentacles. "Anyone else needs to change their bodies?"

"Five or six, I reckon." Elena counted with her fingers. "Betty got her stomach cut in the battle, while Isa was burned by lava when she was covering Alethea. Her entire body was gone except the head. The others either lost an arm or a leg like me. They've been transferred to reserve their souls."

"So you decide to first pick a body you like before transferring?"

"Of course. As I can't feel anything now, I should at least pick a body that meets my taste," Elena answered while twitching her mouth. She sheathed the bloodstained giant sword and carried it on her back, but she soon fell to the ground after stumbling a few paces. "Gee, this damn body."

God's Punishment Warriors could not feel pains or get tired, but they knew when their bodies were shutting down. Even if they were spiritually animated, their bodies of flesh would become extremely weak as though it had got out of their control.

"Let me take you there." Pasha scooped up Elena with her

tentacles and strode to the chamber next to the hall. That was the room where all the God's Punishment Warriors from Hermes without a commander gathered, from whom the survived witches would choose their new bodies. "I saw some good-looking ones among the new warriors."

"Wow, you also care about that?" Elena studied Pasha with some interest.

Pasha coughed. "Don't you forget, I'm also a witch like you."

After all the wounded received treatment, Alethea and Celine brought one piece of good news and one ill. The good news was that the demonic beasts in the maze were practically all dead and that all the flying species hovering outside had fled as well. Therefore, there would not be any attacks on a big scale in a short period of time. The bad news was that two parts of the Instrument of Divine Retribution broke down, which might be attributed to the hasty manner in which the new core had been constructed. In conclusion, they were not going to be shielded by the instrument in the following week.

The bad news made Pasha uneasy. "If an activation like the one today can bring damage to the core, then how is instrument supposed to cope with the activation done by the Chosen One? Does it mean that it can only be used once?"

The more complicated the Key was, the broader the effective area of the wrath of heaven was. The effective area generated by Pasha's activation could only cover the whole maze, which was about a radius of several hundred meters, way too limited to defeat

demons. By the time the instrument was filled with magic power, both she and the instrument would have been destroyed by a spear thrower. If the Chosen One activated it, however, she could spread the lightwave somewhere at least 10 miles away, making the Instrument of Divine Retribution the most powerful and lethal weapon against their enemies.

Celine said drily with a look of resignation, "we don't have good quality materials that could sustain magic power, save some fragile bone ware from the relic, so it's perfectly normal that they don't meet the core's standard. The instrument is, after all, the deities' product. If only the Quest Society still exists. We can use as many golds and silver as we want and don't have to mend it every time we use it."

"Anyway, don't test it again this winter. I don't want to go through such drama every day." Alethea complained.

"Well, we won't have such an opportunity anymore... What?" Celine's words caught in her throat. "Hang on."

"What's the matter?" Pasha asked.

"Look at the phantom instrument." Celine glided to another smaller magic core with the help of her main tentacle attached to the roof. "The sheen of the core has changed. The Five-Colored Stone is broken!"

"What?" Both Pasha and Alethea exclaimed with a start. A sense of evil forebodings prevailed them.

Only when Phyllis had to contact the maze would she break the magic stone. It was very unlikely that she could find the Chosen One within merely a month or so. There were two possibilities: one was that Phyllis encountered some trouble and had no choice but to turn to the maze for help. The other was that... the ring had been destroyed by somebody. Either was not considered to be good news.

"Can you locate her?" Alethea questioned in a low voice.

Celine inserted her tentacles into the core. "In the southwest direction, about... She should be in the territory of the Kingdom of Graycastle, close to the entrance of the Fertile Plains."

Numberless thoughts flashed across Pasha's mind . "The Western Region of Graycastle. It looks like that Phyllis has reached the destination of this trip. What could then force her to break the magic stone? Has she exposed herself by accident, or rather—witches in the new era keep a hostile attitude toward her? Can it be... No, it can't be." Pasha shook her head, trying to put these ideas behind. Most likely Phyllis had run into some difficulties.

"What are you going to do?" Alethea looked at her.

Pasha said ponderously, "turn on the phantom instrument a day later as planned."

This was the shortest time within which they could manage to have the instrument ready.

If the Magic Stone was broken by somebody with malicious intent, they would probably be exposed to ordinary people earlier than they desired. Nevertheless, in any event, Pasha would not abandon Phyllis. They were the last surviving witches from Taquila, who shared the same fate and destiny.

Chapter 729: Recasting the Broken Sword

"Welcome to the Witch Union."

Wendy unrolled the contracts on the desk and said to the witches from Wolfheart smilingly, "sign after you read the sworn words at the back of the contract. Then you'll officially become a member of the union."

They should have gone through this procedure earlier had Princess Tilly not suggested a hunting contest. Wendy did not care about who the winner would be, but she had indeed been concerned about whether all the preparation work for the hunting had been completed. On the very day of the contest, she had been restless. Every minute had been suffering for her. Because of this, she had complained about it to His Majesty for quite a while. The subsequent cannon exercise further postponed the matter. To her surprise, however, Annie, who was always the more self-controlled one, ventured to see her first.

"Wendy, why don't you test our abilities first?" Amy asked.

In about 10 days after they arrived at Neverwinter, this airy, dainty little girl had won everybody's affections. Due to her innocent character, Amy soon established bonds with the other witches. She now felt very comfortable calling Wendy "sister".

"We normally test your ability after you sign the contract," Wendy answered in a soft voice. "If you have any questions or concerns regarding the terms of the contract, please don't hesitate

to ask me now."

"Alright!"

Out of the four witches from Wolfheart, Amy was the only literate one. So, Annie, Broken Sword and Hero all sat around her to listen to the terms while exchanging their thoughts.

Wendy studied the murmuring witches attentively. She recalled the day when she had signed her contract.

At first, she had thought the terms were a little too generous for its own good, and they were very likely just an empty promise through which the lord showcased his benevolence. The terms would probably be changed completely shortly afterward, or there would be another set of implied rules that actually regulated the witches' activities. But later, she had discovered she had been totally wrong. The basic frame of the contract had not gone through many modifications in the past two years. In view of this fact only, Wendy believed that she had made the best decision in her entire life.

"Wow, one gold royal for us each month!"

"Can we buy whatever we want?"

"A paid vacation... Is it true?"

"Witches are entitled to terminate the contract in the event that

His Majesty fails to fulfill his obligations to provide safety, food or accommodations... Is it really not considered to be a betrayal?"

Wendy answered all their questions with a smile like she had done to herself. She pretty much knew exactly when the four witches would utter an exclamation of surprise, as she had been equally astonished by the contract when reading it back then.

His Majesty had granted what witches desired the most, which were freedom and acknowledgment. The fate of the Witch Union had been intertwined with that of Roland Wimbledon. Wendy believed nobody in the union would ever part His Majesty even in the event of a crisis when Roland could no longer shelter or support them.

Such a bond was not expressed in the contract explicitly but was much stronger than any plain words or language.

However, she could also foresee that these sentiments and feelings of contentment would gradually diminish, as newly awakened witches would have a completely different living environment, where there was no threat from the church and no hostility from their relatives or even from their close family members. Given that, new witches would naturally feel less grateful for the new life than old witches.

Following the terms came the oath and the signature line.

There were no mandatory rules of any kind in the oath. The part only stated that Roland and the Witch Union should act with

honor and utmost good faith. It was totally voluntary to join the union. After the four people read and signed, Nightingale pinched Wendy to confirm to her that they had signed the contract with a genuine intention.

"Now, we're sisters." She hugged everyone smilingly.

The Witch Union thus had four more members.

...

The ability test location was outside Witch House where Leaf's "Yard Forest" was.

Annie was the first to take the test. Wendy had learned much about her ability beforehand from Amy. Although Annie could increase the temperature, she could not create fire like Anna. Only her palms turned warm. During the early stage after Annie had awakened, the best she could do was to make the object as warm as a torch. After entering her adulthood when her ability had consolidated, she could heat up ironware until it glowed red. In addition, she could also melt lead and bronze.

During the entire process, Annie looked sullen. Wendy could tell that she had not much confidence in her ability. Wendy fully understood why she felt that way because Annie had once been rejected by the Bloodfang Association. In fact, Wendy had seen many witches like Annie who seemed to only have some useless abilities, for example, Mystery Moon and Echo. Yet no matter how futile their abilities appeared to be, they all eventually found a

suitable position in Neverwinter and put their abilities to good use in the end.

"A great ability." Wendy encouraged her. "The machining plant in the industrial zone would love to have you."

"Re, really?" Annie replied in dismay, "Even if I can only warm up my own palms?"

"Of course. The furnace area and the chemistry lab will also be glad to have you... You'll certainly become a busy girl in the union." Wendy wrote several advisable positions down on the notebook. As far as ability assessment was concerned, King Roland had a better insight into each witch's ability. Wendy knew she was not the perfect person to do the evaluation. Therefore, she would often record her thoughts and ask His Majesty to review. In this way, she could, little by little, improve herself and thus do a better job in the future.

Her ability was not as powerful as most sisters', and her grades were not the best either. His Majesty, nonetheless, entrusted the Witch Union to her. She dreaded failing him.

Annie stepped aside, looking dubious. The second one who took the test was Amy.

Wendy felt reluctant to conduct a full assessment of her ability because Amy actually had to hurt herself in order to showcase her power, notwithstanding that self-healing sounded very appealing. The only good thing about Amy's ability was that Amy did not

need to worry about the negative impact of magic power bite, for she constantly got some minor injuries and used her power all the time.

After a brief interview, Wendy noted down a position as a healer. It appeared that Amy's ability could only be used for healing.

The same applied to the third witch, Hero.

Since she could only transfer diseases rather than offer treatment, the only place she could work at seemed to be the hospital. Wendy remembered that the so-called plague was actually caused by microscopic creatures. Perhaps Hero could help Lily conduct research on microbiology. At this thought, Wendy marked Hero's name with a circle. She believed once Hero received universal education and gained a basic understanding of Natural Science Theoretical Foundation, her ability might experience some changes.

The last one was Broken Sword.

Unlike the previous three witches, the silver-haired witch had never shown her ability to Yorko or Phyllis. As such, Wendy had never heard anything about her power.

"You can go ahead now." She nodded to Broken Sword.

Broken Sword took a deep breath and closed her eyes. As she summoned her magic power, her body started to glow and radiate.

Soon she was surrounded by blinding, flaring light.

Wendy squinted her eyes and stepped back a few paces. Judging from Broken Sword's performance, Wendy judged that she was stronger than the other witches from Wolfheart.

When the light dissipated, Wendy gasped. She could not believe her eyes.

The silver-haired witch had vanished into the thin air. In the snow where she had stood erected a strange-looking sword.

Chapter 730: News from the Mountains

"This is... your ability?" It took Wendy quite a long time to recover from the shock.

Annie answered, "she can't hear you. After Broken Sword becomes a weapon, she'll be completely cut off from the outside world. Only when you hold her can she regain her senses through you."

"I didn't know it worked this way," Wendy thought. She held up the hilt gently after a moment of hesitation. In a second, she sensed another mind in her head. The blade acted with her as one as if it had become a part of her body. Meanwhile, Wendy also felt her sight and hearing improved a lot. She was full of energy and strength.

"Wow, this is..."

"Co-existence." Broken Sword's voice popped up in her head. "When you hold me, you'll gain all the strength and senses I have." There was a hint of regret in Broken Sword's voice at this moment. "The sad thing is that I've been always weak since I was a kid, so what I can give you is very limited. Even if I'm fused with you, I can't be of much help."

Wendy now knew that it was Broken Sword's ability that made her feel powerful.

Wendy held up the weapon and studied it carefully. The hilt felt

warm and soft like a living thing. The shape of the blade appeared weird. It was at an arm's length but was as slim as a finger. The front part was flat and the part close to the hilt round. It looked more like a magnified needle than a sword. If taking a closer look, she could see dense stripe patterns on the blade, as though the sword were tied up with numerous fine threads.

It reminded Wendy of Broken Sword's distinctive silver hair.

"How long can you maintain the sword shape?"

"If I don't constantly switch back and forth, I can be a sword as long as you like."

It seemed that Broken Sword's ability worked the same way as Maggie's. Only the transformation would consume a large amount of magic power.

"Maggie? Are you talking about that giant pigeon?"

Wendy did not realize what had happened until a moment later. She was a little uneasy to learn that Broken Sword could read her mind when they were combined together. There was always something she did not want anybody to know.

"You seemed to be a little perturbed... What's this? A cloth strap?"

"Nothing." Wendy put the blade back to the ground immediately

and looked to Annie. "Ahem, can anyone merge with Broken Sword?"

Annie inclined her head. "Technically, yes, as long as she's willing to accept that person, even if he's just an ordinary man. However, in that case, Broken Sword will simply act as an extremely sharp and deadly weapon. Only witches could demonstrate her real power."

"Witches?"

"Yes." Annie seemed to perceive what Wendy was thinking and replied placidly, "By the way, the connection between you and Broken Sword doesn't mean that she can read your mind. As long as you don't concentrate on your thought, Broken Sword won't know what you're thinking."

"I see." Wendy managed to calm herself down and once again reached the hilt.

"Did I say something that upset you? I'm... sorry. I won't recklessly ask you such questions again." Broken's Sword anxious voice came to her head at once.

"No, nothing..." A question suddenly flashed across Wendy's mind. "What will you see if I put you down without notifying you?"

"It'll be pitch-dark. I can neither hear anything nor sense anything like I'm floating in the air."

"It must be terrible to be deprived of all senses," thought Wendy. At this thought, she tried to sound as friendly as possible. "It's me that has to make an apology... Don't worry. I won't abandon you at random anymore."

Broken Sword appeared to be struck. She responded a "yes" in a soft voice at last after a long silence.

"Right. Annie just said that only witches can demonstrate your real power?"

"That's right. If I just fight as a normal weapon, I'll also get hurt when the person using me strikes too many blows. But witches could sharpen the blade or expand its attacking range by filling it with magic power. In that case, I'll be able to stab enemies without even touching them."

Wendy started to apply her magic power to the blade as Broken Sword had instructed. The silver steel was instantly obscured by a thin layer of white light that stirred like milky fog. In the meantime, she felt the magic power in her body was decreasing rapidly. Apparently, she could not keep things going like this for very long.

Urged by Broken Sword, Wendy swung the long sword at a branch of an olive tree. A gust of air streamed from the tip of the sword and cut the twig in half brusquely.

"This is... wind?" Wendy asked in surprise.

"The magic power you put into the sword will more or less reflect your strength. I didn't expect you're a combat witch." Broken Sword was also a little astounded. "If Annie holds the sword, her power range won't exceed the length of the sword."

"I see." Wendy somehow thought of Anna's Blackfire. What would happen if Anna gave the sword a full swing with all her strength? It would probably be an earth-shattering explosion as intense as the Sigil of God's Will that summoned thunderbolts. Nevertheless, Anna was the most crucial witch in the union and also the beloved one of His Majesty's. It was very unlikely that she would partake in the war personally.

As to the other combat witches... Wendy contemplated for a while but could not find a perfect match. Therefore, she put a circle next to Broken Sword's name as well and decided to let His Majesty determine which one Broken Sword should pair with.

Roland put down the quill in his hand and stretched himself when he heard a high-pitched whistle from the dock.

The whistle blew thrice, one long and two short. Its sound reverberated across the whole shipyard. That was the signal that commanded the army to get ready for the journey.

After the preparation for the war was completed, the expedition corp of the First Army spent the whole morning boarding the boat.

Accompanied by the roar of the whistle, the concrete boat carrying the first batch of soldiers departed the city of Neverwinter and officially commenced her voyage for Fallen Dragon Ridge.

There would be more boats transporting supplies and ammunition later. Indeed, the battle to retrieve the Southernmost Region would not start until both new recruits and veterans assembled at Fallen Dragon Ridge.

But at least, he had taken the first step.

Roland glanced at his desk covered with draft plans of the internal combustion engine. As the second generation power source that had fully replaced steam engines, internal combustion engines had played an irreplaceable role in the development of industries. They had even, to some extents, changed the course of history. Whether it was the simplest piston compressor, the more complicated combustion turbine or the latest jet, they were all powered by internal combustion engines. Roland could confidently say that internal combustion engines had, at one time, dominated the entire industry, until they were later substituted by electric motors.

Beyond a doubt, as one of the most significant machines in the history of time, internal combustion engines would definitely benefit Neverwinter a great deal in the near future. The oil project at Blackwater in the Southernmost Region was pivotal to the whole program. If they could, by any chance, extract fuel oil, the subsequent industrial development would be a matter of course. If they, unfortunately, could not, he would then have to consider alcohol as a substitute. In that case, the industrial expansion would

be greatly limited even with advanced technologies.

Just at that moment, Agatha pounded the door and entered the room.

"Your Majesty, Taquila's witches have gotten back to us."

Chapter 731: The First Contact

In the center of the main hall, the phantom instrument had been completely laid out. With magic power filling it, its core gave off a somber and cold purple light.

After the instrument had been activated, it would activate a light curtain thousands of kilometers away. Unfortunately, such an ability was way beyond the power of the witches. This was directly endowed by God.

Pasha looked back and found that all of the blobs were hanging down and touching the ground. The God's Punishment Witches stood abreast the mounds with serious looks on their faces. The dead hybrid demonic beasts were deliberately placed on opposite sides and under the purple light, their light blue blood reflected fluorescent spots, it looked gloomy and terrifying.

If a group of common people witnessed this, they would have been frightened by such a hellish scene.

Pasha did not want things to turn out like this either. After the start of decomposition, the demonic beasts' remains were going to become sticky and disgusting, and difficult to clean up. Even though the God's Punishment Witches would be unable to smell it, she would sense it with her tentacles. Over 400 years, the hall had come to be their home and no one wanted to mess it up, but she had to prepare for the worst.

That was to say, Phyllis ran into danger and the ring had been

broken by someone else.

If such a disaster really happened, it would be necessary to create the most horrific atmosphere to intimidate or even threaten those who might pose threats to her.

The western region of Graycastle was near the entrance of the Fertile Plains, so each year many lost demonic beasts would attack it. Whoever put Phyllis in danger, whether it was witches or common people, would conclude from the stockpiled dead demonic beasts that they were very difficult to deal with.

Only by making the other side clearly realize that the survivors of Taquila possessed great power, would they be able to bide time for a rescue.

"Activate the instrument," Celine said, "we need to figure out Phyllis' situation."

Pasha touched her main tentacles and gave an order to the instrument.

Everyone immediately noticed the purple light dim as a huge purple curtain made of light enveloped the whole hall and an illusion of a scene appeared on the other side of the phantom instrument and in it the Five-Colored Stone had been broken into pieces.

Pasha was stunned and puzzled.

The place in the scene was not a murky dungeon, nor a remote wilderness, but an open and spacious hall.

The hall was very bright and clear and a long wooden table stood in the center of it, topped by a white tablecloth that held flowers and teacups. There were no signs of fighting, so it looked like the place had been deliberately chosen to just destroy the Magic Stone.

Phyllis was currently standing by a window as she chatted with another witch. She noticed the light curtain and turned around with a very surprised face as she asked, "What happened? Was the hall attacked?"

"Uh..." Pasha didn't know how to respond at the moment. Phyllis' situation did not match her assumptions. Phyllis had not been attacked or tortured, and she wasn't even in danger. In fact, she was in higher spirits now than when she had departed. Looking carefully, Phyllis wasn't wearing that cheap and vulgar maid suit. Instead, she was wearing a fine fluffy cloak and against the gorgeous clothes, naturally, she had a good complexion.

Everyone was as shocked as Pasha. They glanced around at one another, but no one opened their mouth to speak. Luckily, they became expressionless after they became blobs, otherwise, it would have been very embarrassing.

"Recently, the demonic beasts launched an attack, but the magic core and the relics of gods are safe and sound. We're also all alive, so don't worry." As the most seasoned, Pasha was the first to regain

her senses. She then added, "But, the bodies are many and we haven't had enough time to clear them out."

"Really?" Phyllis doubted.

"Of course, ahem..." Pasha waved her tentacles towards the God's Punishment Witches behind her for emphasis. "Well, you continue to clean up the remains and remove them from the labyrinth before their fluids dry to the ground."

The witches, who stood abreast with their serious looks, appeared to be extremely disappointed.

"How can we throw away so many bodies?"

"It takes us the whole day to pile them up."

"I don't want to touch those sticky and disgusting bodies."

"You're right. Although we can't smell it, they look incredibly disgusting."

"Stop complaining. Are you really willing to sleep with those bodies?"

"Can we throw them into the lava? At most, it'll only smoke like a fire."

"I can't believe you! Do you want to turn the entire ruin into a chimney?"

"Pfft..." The blue-haired witch standing beside Phyllis couldn't keep from laughing. "My guess is, they thought that you were in danger, so they arranged this scene to intimidate us."

Pasha found her voice somewhat familiar and when she looked at her carefully, her name suddenly came to her mind.

"Are you Agatha?"

"What?" Celine questioned in surprise. "The youngest Senior Witch in history?"

"That's impossible. She fell with Taquila, didn't she?"

"Even if she managed to escape from the Holy City, how could she still have the same appearance as she did over 400 years ago?"

Both of the promoted people temporarily living in the meat lumps and the God's Punishment Witches made sounds of perplexity.

"She's indeed that senior witch," Phyllis stated. "After she had been attacked by the demons in the research tower of the Misty Forest, she used the multi-layered frozen coffin to completely freeze herself and it killed all of her pursuers at the same time. When the Witch Union discovered the stone tower ruins, she was

rescued."

And, that was what had happened.

As she heard this, Pasha felt instantly excited and an encouraging idea aroused from her deep heart. Phyllis had not fallen with Taquila and she quickly revealed her identity to the witches of Graycastle. Besides, she also encountered a promoted person from Taquila, so Phyllis must have a clear purpose to contact the maze. Perhaps, this Senior Witch would be the Chosen One they had been looking for.

Upon hearing this, Phyllis gave them a look of embarrassment and she hesitated.

She first glanced at Agatha before saying in a low voice, "Could you give us a moment? It won't take long."

Agatha nodded. "When you're done, I'll inform His Majesty." Having finished, she turned around and left the hall.

Then Phyllis took a deep breath and looked at Pasha again. "I've indeed found the Chosen One claimed by the Magic Stone, but he's different from the people in our plan."

"Wait a moment, he?" Pasha was stunned. Before she could ask further about it, Phyllis began to tell her about her absurd experience.

About how the witches could closely collaborate with common people.

About the powerful army that defeated the church.

About the powerful gunpowder weapons.

And, the most incredible thing... The Chosen One was one of the common people.

Chapter 732: An Ideal Beginning

When Phyllis told them the news, all the witches in the hall were excited.

"How can common people contact God?" Alethea's voice was full of astonishment and incredulity. "You must be wrong about that!"

"Are you sure that the orange beam of the light was from his body? Have all of the witches in the western region of Graycastle checked it?" Celine directly asked the key point.

These two questions were the exact thoughts of everyone.

"I've seen it personally. Besides, his Key is so much more complex than Pasha's requirements that the Five-Colored Stone can't contain the mountain-like orange light." Phyllis uttered her words slowly, "I couldn't believe it at the beginning either, but it's the truth."

"Does he have magic power?" Pasha asked with the last shred of hope in her heart.

"It's a pity that he can't activate the Instrument of Divine Retribution."

It was a great surprise to find the Chosen One, who has such a sophisticated key, in such short time, but what Phyllis had said disappointed all of them. Now that the surprise unexpectedly

arrived, no one would have predicted that the Chosen one had the key, but did not have magic power, a discovery that completely overturned their previous idea.

Although the Chosen One had the Key, he could not connect to the core due to the absence of magic power, not even with the help of witches. They had fully proved in the Taquila age that common people could not endure the harm brought by magic power, even the tough ones could only sustain for about 30 minutes. They were unable to master the key points of using it.

She had thought that Senior Witches were likely to become the Chosen One and that it would be easier to find dozens of eligible candidates in the age when the Union controlled the Fertile Plains. However, what worried her the most was that the news brought by Phyllis totally broke her illusions. There were over 10 higher ascendants living in the small city of Neverwinter.

With such a surprising number of higher ascendants, the Witch Union was equivalent to some core organizations of the Union, such as the Quest Society and the Blessed Army that did not have more higher ascendants. Even so, Phyllis could not discover another Chosen One among them.

There were two totally different ideas in her mind. One was that it had been easier to eliminate the demons and that they had missed the opportunity, for they discovered the ruin too late. The other one was that they, in fact, did not have access to their targets at all and that it totally was their one-sided will to execute the plan of the Chosen One. If those Senior Witches could not meet the requirements of the Chosen One, would they be right to follow

Lady Natalia and to determinedly resist the God's Punishment Army plan of the Queen of Starfall City?

Pasha felt terrified when thinking of this idea. She shook her head to calm the surging thoughts down and then asked, "Did you mention that the king of the common people wants to cooperate with us?"

"He wants to know us and is willing to fight against the demons with us," Phyllis said, "but I'll only know the detailed requirements after a negotiation."

"Do you think that he's capable of fighting against the demons?"

"I'm not sure... his weapons are astonishingly powerful, but I pitifully know little about that." Phyllis hesitated for a while and comforted them, "But Agatha is very sure about that. In her view, if Neverwinter is given two or three more years, it's very likely to confine the demons to the west of the Impassable Mountain Range."

"What does she think of the relationship between us and Neverwinter?" Alethea asked in a deep voice.

"In Agatha's view, she's a witch of Taquila, but she'll work for Roland Wimbledon, the king in the secular world." Phyllis paused and spoke out her thoughts of the New Union, "She thinks that the most urgent mission at the moment is to defeat the demons. Additionally, all forces on the continent should be unified and fight together to face the third Battle of Divine Will."

"Working for common people? Has she lost her mind?" Alethea shouted, "Did she forget how we lost to the demons in the first Battle of Divine Will?"

There was a discussion amongst the crowd. Almost all members of the Union must learn that period of history. There might be one extraordinary person amongst the common people, but as a whole, they had behaved badly.

For example, they opened the city gate to surrender to the demons and they were all killed. The army of witches marched on from thousands of kilometers away to rescue them, but they were rejected outside the gate by the lord, who then witnessed those witches being killed by the demons. In many cases, common people were clambering to escape from the battlefield. Sometimes, a huge army had as many as 20,000 or 30,000 soldiers, but its fighting capacity was no better than that of a witch team with about 100 people. In some places, common people even utilized God's Stone of Retaliation against witches, which exacerbated the breakdown between them.

If not so, the human beings would not have been forced to withdraw from the big Land of Dawn to the Fertile Plains.

With such bad behavior and their struggle to get food and resources, it was quite reasonable for witches to completely replace the regime of common people.

Seeing Alethea wriggling the whole body to express her

dissatisfaction, Pasha had the same concerns in her heart. From the descriptions Phyllis gave, Roland Wimbledon, the king of Graycastle, was probably an extraordinary person, but he alone could not change the entirety of common people. If other kings committed stupid and rudimentary mistakes, which side would he back? If the war lasted for 20 or 30 years, would he be as determined and energized as he is now?

Not all people would be willing to possess an empty body so as to lengthen their lives at the expense of senses. Even if he was willing to do it, would his offsprings agree with this in 40 or 50 years? Would they be willing to be heirs all of their lives?

These were all the questions that Pasha needed to think about.

Generally speaking, any cost would be worthwhile if they could defeat the demons. Both Alice and Natalia firmly believed that as long as the human beings and witches were alive, the witches would regain their glory one day, which was exactly the innate difference between God's Honors and common people.

However, what she was concerned about was that even though they paid a price, would they still totally defeated? After all, they would not get another chance to try.

"Let's first talk with Roland," Celine pressed on the indignant Alethea with her main tentacles. "When I was in the Quest Society, I had dealings with Agatha. Though she was sympathetic to common people, she would think twice before an action. Additionally, given that we were planning to communicate with the kingdoms in the secular world, now that there is a king such as

Roland who doesn't discriminate against witches and makes preparations for the Battle of Divine Will in advance, isn't this an ideal beginning for us?"

"I agree with you. We alone can't defeat the demons."

"We can also expand our influence among all witch organizations with the help of common people."

"What's more, he's helping to rope witches in... so Phyllis is more likely to find another Chosen One."

"I'm curious about those gunpowder weapons. If we're equipped with them, will it be as easy for us to kill the demons as it is to kill demonic beasts?"

The God's Punishment Witches talked it over with each other.

"Celine was right." Pasha sighed and thought that since they had to collaborate with common people, such an open king like Roland, was the most suitable counterpart to discuss the matters with, regardless of the idea of the New Union. They could not decide their road afterwards until the discussion. Perhaps, Roland held the same thought.

Thinking of this, she nodded her tentacles toward Phyllis and said, "I know. Please let's talk to His Majesty Roland Wimbledon."

Chapter 733: The Time Before the Past

...

When Roland stepped into the living room, his attention was suddenly drawn by the light curtain that sheltered half a wall.

The edges of the light curtain exuded a flickering purple light as if a passageway connecting with different planes was dug through the wall. On the other side, the scene was quite dark, which looked like a huge hollow cavity under the ground. The reflections of the red river which flew in thin streams like cobwebs, lightened the rocky walls and the dome, vaguely showing the ancient ruin and its silhouette. Judging from the vivid visual effect, it should not be a built-up illusion, but a live broadcast transmitted from tens of hundreds of kilometers away.

A giant sarcomatoid monster with its tentacles spreading was facing Roland. A strange voice sounded in Roland's head.

"I'm sorry for keeping you waiting, my respected king of Graycastle, Your Majesty Roland Wimbledon. I'm Pasha, one of the survivors of Taquila. I think you must've heard of us from Phyllis."

"Ah, this is what direct communication means." Roland sat down facing the light curtain while being joined by Nightingale, Tilly, Agatha, Wendy and Scroll. "It's good that you've talked to each other, I don't have to introduce myself."

"You don't seem to be surprised by my appearance at all." Pasha

was a little surprised. "I thought it would take quite some time before you could accept the idea that I am indeed a witch."

"Because I'm really not a stranger to the sort of concepts such as appendages and prosthesis," Roland thought to himself, but he said in a peaceful voice, "With the Bloody Moon drawing near, time is precious for both of our sides. Rather than concealing from each other and suspecting each other, it's better that we just be honest with each other from the very beginning. Since you've been the rulers of the continent, I guess you all agree with me?"

Pasha was startled for a moment, then burst into a light laughter. "Phyllis was right. You're indeed a rare and extraordinary person."

"Only because I stand on the predecessors' shoulders," Roland said with his hands laid out. "Let's get to business. We have a common goal, and that is to fight against the demons. The purposes you sent Phyllis out with were, to search for the Chosen One and to communicate with the worldly kingdom, am I right?"

"Totally," Pasha admitted frankly. "At first we wanted to infiltrate secretly, then gradually recruit or control some common people to search for the Chosen One. But the failure of the church made us realize another way to success, which is to show ourselves above board and gather all the witches."

"So you chose Graycastle as your destination?"

"According to the information that we collected, the Sleeping Island in Fjords possesses the hugest witch organization, the leader

of which is your younger sister. Moreover, Graycastle is a big country which defeated the church, so choosing it as our first destination in search of the Chosen One was quite plausible. But I didn't expect that Phyllis would connect with you so soon and bring us an astonishing message. To be honest, I thought it'd take us two to three years to achieve this."

"Great. It seems we've saved two to three years of precious time. Our meeting is worthy of being written into history for this accomplishment alone," Roland said, smiling.

"It seems so," Pasha also smiled and said, "but the premises are that we defeat the demons and then live and prosper in the Land of Dawn."

"Sure, as long as the commoners and witches could drop the misunderstandings and cooperate hand in hand, demons aren't an indestructible enemy." Roland paused and said, "I could also help you in your search for the Chosen One. After all, it's not a bad thing to have one more powerful weapon to compete with the demons, but our cooperation must rest on mutual understandings. What do you think?"

"Agreed." The tentacles on Pasha's body waved tidily. "If there is anything you want to know, please just ask, Your Majesty."

Roland turned around, looked at Tilly and all the other witches, then said slowly, "After hearing about the buried history, my biggest confusion is, what on earth did you find in the ruin? For that, Taquila took on the huge cost of breaking with Starfall City, which then led to the collapse of the Union."

This was also one of the key reasons why Roland decided to actively contact the survivors. The technique of Soul Transfer was something that even modern science and technology could not tackle. The Instrument of Divine Retribution which the witches believed could replace the God's Punishment Army plan and thoroughly destruct the demons, must be extraordinary. He would not blindly believe the scientific and technological knowledge he possessed was perfect. Drawing on each other's merits and raising the level together was common sense to modern people.

As a matter of fact, he had always wanted to combine this seemingly omnipotent magic power with science and technology. When he saw the witch precisely transmit live images onto the western region castle with the aid of the objects taken from the ancient ruin, he was determined that this meeting was absolutely necessary.

There was no doubt that this must be beyond the witches ability limit.

"Pasha!"

"Are you sure you want to tell him all about it?"

"That's God's secret!"

"We made a big sacrifice to..."

Instantly, several voices full of worries or dissatisfaction rushed through his mind. Roland then realized that many other Taquila witches were also witnessing this meeting.

"It's exactly because we've made a big sacrifice... We shouldn't do that in vain." Pasha interrupted the crowd's discussion. "If we can't withstand the demons massive invasion, do you wish for us to bring this secret to the grave, like those tombstones we found?"

Her loud retort quietened the crowd. It was probably because she made a crucial point, nobody else stood out to object to her anymore.

This reaction drew Roland's attention. "It seems that what Phyllis said about the survivors was mostly true. They have, to some extent, eliminated the influence of class and status, otherwise, they wouldn't have argued about such a major issue on the spot. But generally speaking, Pasha remains of relatively high prestige among them."

"Sorry, this information is indeed of vital importance..." Pasha's tentacles drooped toward the living room as though they were expressing an apology. "Under these circumstances, it can't remain a secret anymore. At least not between each other." After a moment's silence, she added, "To be precise, it wasn't that we found the ruin, but it was the ruin which reached out to us."

Roland frowned, "It reached out to Taquila?"

"Not Taquila, but a time prior to ours... approximately not long

after the beginning of the first Battle of Divine Will."

"By 'us', does Pasha mean the entire human race?" Somehow, Roland felt a chill spreading from under his feet. "That was almost 800 years ago."

"That's true. Unfortunately, we didn't get its meaning then." Pasha sighed. "What reached out to us was a civilization. One that had disappeared underground."

Chapter 734: The Root of the Divergence

"Underground... civilization?"

Roland could not help but think of the turnoffs on the North Slope Mine and the cluster of grottos running through the Impassable Mountain Range... In his memory, no geological movement could create such unique landforms. At first, he thought that they were created by some sort of mutant hybrid demonic beasts. But according to what Pasha said, maybe they were traces left by the underground civilization?

"At that time, people didn't realize it, nor did they intend to communicate with it. Our forms were so different that we even considered them as a new type of demon, which was why there was a huge deviation on the recorded history. It wasn't until the final phase of the second Battle of Divine Will that there was a breakthrough discovery." Pasha's voice was low and deep. "By then, Taquila was the only city left of the three holy cities. The Union had reached a vital moment of survival or extinction."

"What do you mean by a breakthrough discovery?"

"With the help of the remaining lithograph, the Quest Society figured out the way to store souls and verified it on an unhatched original carrier. Since then, the Three Chiefs embarked on the research for the transformation of the God's Punishment Army."

"I know nothing about that..." Agatha said surprisingly.

"Soul Transfer was the top secret of the Union. Its classification was even two levels higher than that of the God's Punishment Army plan in which witches were used as the experiment mice. At that time, only the Three Chiefs and a few senior officials knew of it," Pasha replied. "I only learned this astonishing information with the fall of Taquila."

"So Natalia supported the God's Punishment Army plan in the beginning?" Roland asked, frowning. "What's an original carrier?"

"Because she was left with no choice. As to the latter... it's what we look like right now." Her tentacles drooped more and her body got closer to the light curtain. "My weird, ugly shell is the evidence that the underground civilization existed. It's the only tombstone that it left. It's a long story. Your Majesty, please allow me to slowly tell you."

Roland nodded, poured himself a glass of Chaos Drink, leaned back in the chair and began to sense the consciousness transmitted from Pasha.

"According to the clues on the lithograph, the evanescent civilization left a city in the Impassable Mountain Range. The Quest Society searched for a long time without gaining anything. Then one day it occurred to them that since this civilization was used to moving underground, could this city be built underground as well?"

"After extending the search area, the witches finally found this magnificent city. It consisted of four layers with an area of about half the size of Taquila. On each layer there were countless

turnoffs and hollow cavities, which were as complex as a maze. Without the guidance of a witch who could sense directions, one could easily get lost and never get out. For this reason, the Quest Society also called it the maze ruin."

"Unfortunately before the Quest Society could carefully explore it, Taquila was occupied by the demons. Everybody had to escape from home. After paying a heavy price, we finally arrived at the maze. According to our plan, the Union would take away the original carrier stored in the maze, leave for the Hermes Plateau, and then build a new Holy City to restore orders at the east coast of the continent."

"But no one would've guessed what would happen next."

Pasha paused and the scales on her body dimmed. Even without looking at her facial expression, Roland could sense the grief in her heart.

After quite a while, she resumed transmitting. "Although it was after an interval, the Quest Society found the maze ruin that had been preserved in good condition. One can even say that it was an entirely new city. Besides the original carrier, the bottom layer of the ruin stored many unconceivable secrets, the most important three of which were the magic core, the central carrier, and the record of the evanescent civilization. Afterwards, the idea came to our minds that as early as the first Battle of Divine Will, the underground civilization had intended to lead us here." Pasha inhaled deeply. "The maze ruin was prepared for us."

"What for?" Tilly could not help but ask.

"For revenge." Another voice appeared in everybody's head. Compared with Pasha, this witch's tone was much colder. "It hoped that we could destroy the demons and take revenge for its clan's extinction."

"It's only Lady Natalia's speculation. It wasn't recorded in the document." Pasha waved her tentacles like shaking a head. "It could be that they simply wanted their civilization to be passed down. Anyway, from the remaining record, the Quest Society retrieved many research materials related to God's will and magic power. In order for us to understand the details, most of its conclusions were expressed in lithographs."

"And the record about the magic core is the very root of the divergence between the Queen of Sunchaser and the Queen of Starfall City. One of the most important messages in the lithographs is, 'magic power offers infinite possibilities and the pursuit of God's will is the ladder to mastering magic power'."

Roland sensed the key point coming. "What's the magic core? Does it have anything to do with the Instrument of Divine Retribution?"

"You can take the core as an artificial Magic Cyclone. It's not confined to a witch's body and can adjust its forms at any time. This bizarre device almost overturned the Union's knowledge system." Using one of her tentacles to point at the light curtain, Pasha said, "For example, the phantom instrument we're using for our communication is a minor scaled magic core. When necessary, it can be converted into other instruments. As to the Instrument of

Divine Retribution, it's the biggest magic core in the ruin."

"I see..." Roland instantly realized the superiority of this instrument. Compared with the witches abilities which were inherently unchangeable, the magic core was virtually a universal terminal. Most of all, its effective distance far exceeded the five-meter limit. Either for production or for military use, it was way more powerful than the witches.

"But it's just the primary usage of the magic power. Just as the relationship between the original awakening and the high evolution, the lithograph predicted that with the deepening of the development of magic power, one day we could finally be equivalent to God..." Pasha said with a sense of loss as if she was not saying something significant. Instead, she sounded like someone who had lost their way.

Roland realized the point of her last words.

"But you ran out of time."

"You're right. At first, we didn't know how long it would take for that day to arrive. It could take a century or a millennium. In order to approach the magic core, several Quest Society members had lost their lives. Obviously, witches can't touch those bizarre instruments. We wanted to solve the problem, but didn't know how to do it, so our exploration came to a dead end. The lithograph could only show very limited information. If we were to carry out our research, we had to follow their instructions. Only when there were enough people integrated with the central carrier, could we comprehend their language so as to further read their more

profound documents and records."

"But we didn't have enough time. We'd spent three years figuring these things out. Many common people who had joined us earlier tried to get rid of our control and knowing how many witches were needed to integrate with the carrier remained unknown. But at that time, our resources could only sustain one attempt of research. If it went on like this, the great plan of the Union to restore order would have lost its foundation."

"The most important thing is that Lady Alice's plan of the God's Punishment Army has an irreconcilable conflict with the concept recorded in the underground civilization's documents. If a witch abandons her body to become a God's Punishment Warrior, she'll not only lose the chance to be promoted," Pasha paused, then said, "but also lose God's Will forever."

Chapter 735: Legacy of the Civilization

Roland could easily guess what had happened next.

After knowing that God's Punishment Army was not the only way to compete with demons on the battlefields any more, the Taquila survivors who didn't want to reduce their own kind to the materials for shells must have caused a great conflict with Alice.

Given that, the Battle of Faiths recorded in the written history of the the church probably is just a story made up to cover the truth of this dispute.

As for the root of this disagreement, it did not just lie in the difference between the faith in God's Punishment Army and that in the Chosen One. At that moment, all the leaders of the Union must have been very clear that neither of the choices was able to guarantee their victory in the war against demons.

According to Phyllis, the plan proposed by the Queen of Starfall City to have God's Punishment Army rest in an everlasting sleep would indeed create 3,000 to 4,000 powerful, experienced extraordinary warriors before the third Battle of Divine Will, but the survivors of the Union had also noticed a fatal defect in this plan. As souls needed lots of time to adapt to their shells, once this army suffered an inevitable loss during the wartime, it would be impossible for the Union to replace casualties with new warriors in a short time. As a result, this army might only be able to block demons for a decade, or even, by any chance, retrieve the ruined Holy City of Taquila, but they could never recapture the whole Land of Dawn.

As for the choice to search for the Chosen One, they had thought it as an even more risky plan because of its extremely slim chance of success. However, they had also seen the benefit of it. If they found the one, human beings would be able to win the war at little cost and would even get closer to the deities based on the records on the lithograph.

For the survivors of the Union, searching for the Chosen One meant betting on the future while the God's Punishment Army plan the present.

"What about the result? Did you defeat the Starfall City?" Roland asked.

"Taquila was not the final winner. No one would be in this conflict. When both sides lose their Transcendents, Lady Eleanor stood out to stop this internal disaccord and integrated herself into the central carrier. She was the first witch merging with it."

Shocked, Agatha asked, "You mean, in the ruins of the maze, all the Three Chiefs were..."

Pasha said plaintively, "Yes, the Union lost all the three Transcendents in this internal struggle. It was also the end of the Three Chiefs system. As a result, the ruins of the maze became an indispensable part of the Union. Both sides decided to stop fighting and then reached an agreement through negotiation. As agreed, the survivors of Taquila stayed in the ruins studying the magic core and those of the Starfall City went to Hermes and built a new

Holy City there. Due to the limited number of the original carriers, the survivors of the Starfall City also agreed to offer us a certain number of empty shells in the next 100 years. "

"We also agreed that if we failed to make a breakthrough in the Chosen One plan or found no leads of her, they would have the right to take back all the research results in the ruins, including the soul containers and the original carriers. They claimed that by then they would come with their God's Punishment Warriors and that if we broke the agreement, they would never compromise again."

Notice something was wrong here, Roland interrupted, "wait... After 100 years, the church didn't come to you, did they?"

Based on what he knew, in the past hundreds of years, the witches of Taquila had hid underground and never had a say in the world. Meanwhile all the church's God's Punishment Warriors had been soulless. Despite the defect in the warriors, the church still greatly outnumbered the Taquila witches, yet it had never sent any troops to the ruins of the maze. Roland wondered whether the church people had totally forgotten about this agreement.

Pasha sighed. "For a long time we were unable to know what was going on in Hermes or any other things that happened outside the ruins of the maze since the original carriers could not be exposed to the sun and the witches who transferred their souls into new bodies needed a long time to adapt to them. When we were able to go outside, we were surprised to discover that they didn't follow lady Alice's will when building the new order."

Agatha said through her teeth, "I knew that! I knew lady Alice would never create such rules. As compared to her plan of God's Punishment Army, what the church did was destroying the foundation of the witches!"

All the Taquila survivors agreed with her at once.

Roland waited until they calmed down and changed the subject. "What's a central carrier? Is it different from the original carriers?"

Another voice started to explain, "They're all shells. As the living beings of the underground civilization were extremely fragile, they had to live in shells. These things were immortal, but we can't find any detailed information about where they came from in the documents left in the ruins. Based on what we know now, the original carriers are the most common shells, whereas the central carrier which looks similar to them stores many unconscious memories. You can consider it as an original carrier which had been used for many years but had no self-awareness. We need to integrate all the memories into it to understand the remaining documented experient records in the ruins." She sounded soft and elegant, different from Pasha and the angry witch.

Listening to this voice, Roland quickly pictured in his head an academic woman who had a long thick braid and wore a pair of black-framed round glasses. He said to her, "Thank you for explaining this to me, you're..."

"My name is Celine, Your Majesty. I was a member of the Quest Society and used to work with Agatha."

Agatha got closer to him and whispered in his ear, "I'm not familiar with her. We worked in the same research tower but on different floors. I heard that she was a quiet girl, but every time when it came to magic power, she would become passionate, acting like a totally different person."

Hearing this, Roland thought, "Only someone like this woman would become a faithful follower of Natalia." He cleared his throat and asked her another question, "So, are the witches who merged with the central carrier still alive?"

Celine replied, "not really. Apart from the dozen witches who severely injured in the internal battle, there was another thirty-six of us who volunteered to follow lady Eleanor to merge with it. Not everyone was willing to turn into such a monster or spend the rest of her life trapped in a body that can't feel anything. Their sacrifice finally activated the central carrier, but unfortunately, it can only say yes or no in a dialogue but can't make a normal conversation."

Roland was intrigued at once. "It can answer yes or no to any question?"

Celine also grew a little more excited. "It only answers a question it understands and it'll respond more quickly if you specify your question. It enables us to mend or adjust the magic core. It's essentially a combination of all the Taquila witches' willpower. The more witches merge with it, the faster its reaction is. For us, to accompany Lady Eleanor was the last we can do to contribute to the search for the magic power."

Meanwhile, Roland was excited about something else. "Doesn't the mechanism of input and feedback sound like a primary bio-computer system? If I set all the conditions, will the central carrier be able to solve an equation or complete some complex calculations by itself? I really want to take this thing to Neverwinter and thoroughly study it here!"

Knowing that it was not the time to make such a request, he decided to put those thoughts aside at this moment and express his wish in future negotiations.

He drank all the Chaos Drink in his cup and said, "I see. Now I've got a basic understanding of your situation, but I still have one question. You, the church and those ancient books have repeatedly mentioned the Divine Will, and I heard that one could even feel the existence of the deities in a secret chamber exclusive for the Pope on the top floor of a secret temple under the Hermes Plateau. Could you tell me what the Divine Will is? "

Chapter 736: The Giant Paintings and the Divine Will

Pasha was astonished at Roland's question for a moment and then said, "Phyllis is right. You do know lots about us. As for the Divine Will, we didn't know much about it until the fall of Taquila, so it's impossible for you to get this information from Agatha."

Roland put on some airs by propping his chin with interlaced fingers and said, "Don't forget it, the church was defeated by me. All the Pure Witches who held management positions in the Holy City of Hermes now are imprisoned in Neverwinter."

"I see."

With these words, Pasha became silent, as if she were looking at Roland carefully. Even though she had no eyes, he could still felt her gaze. After a long time, Pasha's voice appeared in his head again. "I can tell you what the Divine Will is, but you have to promise you'll keep this secret forever and so do the others in this meeting. If people are running after or protecting something intangible, they won't easily fall into despair, but when this something becomes tangible, they'll probably get stressed out. I mean if this information is leaked out, it'll do no good to human beings."

Roland made an eye contact with all his witches to confirm that they would keep this secret and then asked in a deep voice, "So that's to say, the Divine Will is something tangible?"

Pasha slowed down, as if she was talking while recalling. "Yes, it looks like a transparent God's Stone of Retaliation, shaped like a spindle apparatus, but it can't affect the use of magic power or has any other special function. As long as you open your heart near it, you'll truly feel the call of the deities and see something incredible."

"Like what?"

"You'll see an infinitely spacious hall with the Bloody Moon high above your head and four giant paintings around you. The paintings seem to be alive and change all the time..." The ancient witch described the illusion created by the Divine Will in detail.

Tilly could not help asking, "What do those paintings stand for?"

Hearing this question, all of them held their breath waiting for the answer.

Pasha's tentacles stood up at once. "This question baffled the people for nearly 1,000 years. The Quest Society kept on looking for the answer but failed. We had no idea about it either until we decoded the contents in the documented records in the ruins of ruins. The four paintings the deities showed us respectively represent the mankind, the demons, some unknown enemy and the underground civilization. The shape of the Divine Will corroborates this speculation, as it's not a complete spindle apparatus but a quarter of a sphere which we called the relic of the deities."

Roland knitted his eyebrows. "Four Giant Paintings and a quarter of the relic of deities... Do you mean every civilization pictured in the paintings has a relic like this?"

"Not everyone. The underground civilization lost its part of the Divine Will. As a result, one of the paintings showed by the deities is always black. It turned black right after the end of the first Battle of Divine Will. According to the documented records in the ruin of the maze and those in the ancient documents of the Union, we surmise that the underground civilization is already removed from the Battle of Divine Will forever." Gooseprickles crawled up everyone's arms when they heard Pasha's answer.

They were shocked to learn that all the civilizations had fought for hundreds of years just for some relic, and more importantly, for each civilization, losing its part of relic would mean losing everything.

Hearing such a shocking news, Roland knitted his eyebrows even more tightly together. As compared to some unknown enemy in this war, what he cared more about was who had set up the whole thing. He wondered, "is it merely an accident or carefully arranged. Did it happen randomly or due to human being's doomed fate? What's the purpose of leaving behind this relic? Does it have anything to do with the Bloody Moon which emerges periodically? More importantly, did the Taquila survivors understand these things correctly?" He was lost in thought and meanwhile felt he caught a vague clue...

He thought, "What if I replace the word 'deities' in this story with something else?"

When he was absorbed in thought, Tilly asked, "If we collect all of the four parts of the relic, what will happen? Didn't the deities give you any guidance?"

Pasha calmly replied, "No one knows the answer, and the deities have never responded to our calls. The deities don't love people. They only favor the winner."

Wendy exclaimed in disbelief, "How come... we've fought for hundreds of years just because of a useless stone? The Divine Will is... so cruel."

The ancient witch tried to comfort her. "So it appears. I hope these words in the documented records in the ruins of the maze will solve your question, although they are quite hard to understand. 'All of us are the deities' children, but only a few of us will be able to see the dawn. Since we sensed magic power, we've been destined to lead a life uncommon. This competition has lasted for a long period of time. We are already one-in-a-thousand elite. Birds weren't birds, and we weren't us. Fighting makes things thrive, and competition makes living beings eternal.'"

Something flashed across Roland's mind like a bolt of lightning.

He abruptly interrupted, 'What did you say?'

"All of us are the deities' children?"

"No, something after this."

Scroll replied, "'this competition has lasted for a long period of time. We are already one-in-a-thousand elite.' Your Majesty, I've memorized all of it."

What does that sound like?

This thing described by the underground civilization resembles the process of evolution! From barbaric period to civilized age, every civilization that exists now has defeated numerous opponents during its development course.

And all the four different civilizations we know have a thing in common, which is they all know how to use magic power.

Among human beings, witches are the ones who can use this kind of power, and demons and the underground civilization seem to be even better at controlling it. Given that, the other unknown enemy must also be able to use it.

If that's true, everything will be consistent with the underground civilization's description. The "children" in the sentence "All of us are the deities' children" probably refers to the species who were gifted to manipulate magic power.

In this way, the Battles of Divine Will aren't caused by the deities' relic. Instead, they are just a means of accelerating evolution or the basic rules of this magic world. This also corroborates the

underground civilization's conclusion that elevating magic power is the way to get closer to the deities.

Pasha's voice reverberated across Roland's head. "Your Majesty, are you all right? I feel your mind is a little out of order."

"Oh? Are you able to see what I'm thinking?"

"No, I can only know what you are thinking when you are ready to communicate with me through your mind. For example, now I'm willing to talk with you through my mind, so you are able to hear what I'm thinking." Pasha paused for a while and asked, "It'll be more efficient to communicate that way. Do you want to give it try?"

Roland shook his head, smiling. "No, I prefer to express myself using my throat and my tongue. As for the confusion... I just thought of something interesting. But relax, it won't affect our communication."

Thinking that sometimes rules were just rules and there might not be a reason for them, he felt it was acceptable to consider them as something created by the deities. As far as he knew, the origin of life and the Cambrian explosion on earth were also puzzling things. Life is said to form out of lightning and boiling water where organic molecules constantly collided, merged and split and then formed a molecular chain which could reproduce itself. The chance of that is as slim as that of a hurricane assembling a Benz sports car by whirling lots of metal parts into the air.

As for the Cambrian explosion, it was even more mysterious. A sea which only had had some simple creatures such as algae and mollusc for several hundred million years seemed to be filled with various kinds of animals overnight. In a short span of time in the Cambrian period, most major animal phyla of the earth appeared in a sudden. No matter how living beings on the earth evolved in the following years, they can all be traced back to their origins that formed in this period of time.

As these two great changes which gave a strong impetus to the species evolution on the earth are both events of extremely low probability, some people attribute them to some mysterious power beyond description. They believe that it's an invisible hand that pushed the world on the earth to develop into what it's like today. What about this strange magic world? Does such power really exist in here?

Chapter 737: The Leader

Roland was clear that it was nothing but his own speculation.

I can't jump to a conclusion based solely on the documentation of the underground civilization since their contents still need further verification. For example, the underground civilization thought that they successfully survived a series of competition, but what about their opponents who probably were also able to use magic power? Where did they leave their traces? What about human beings? Did witches first appear before the first Battle of Divine Will— or rather, was the mankind gifted with the sense of magic when they were still primates or even at the beginning of the Mammalian age?

Maybe, human beings in this world didn't go through such a long process of evolution at all. Could they directly become what they are now through mutation after gaining a victory?

He was afraid that to answer these questions, he would need a great number of outstanding explorers like Thunder.

As compared to those researches, his top priority still remained to be human survival, but he believed that it was just a matter of time for him to find out the answers.

He looked at Pasha, asking, "Before you moved this part of relic underground, had it been kept by the church... no, I mean the Starfall City all the time?"

Now that he knew the importance of the relic, he started to care about its safety.

"Yes. Due to the existence of the giant paintings, burying it underground can't prevent the Divine Will. Therefore, it's always kept by the most powerful witch organization. During the Months of Demons when magic power reaches its peak, demonic beasts will come for it. That was why they launched frenzied attacks at Hermes during those months before." With these words, Pasha moved her giant body away, revealing the scene behind her. Two piles of dead bodies of demonic beasts stood there with light blue blood dripping down and flowing all over the ground. Pasha continued, "After we knew the Starfall City had suffered a serious setback, we took back the relic as soon as we could. Now it's very safe in our hands."

Wendy gasped at the sight. "How did you kill that many hybrid demonic beasts?"

"The Instrument of Divine Retribution can deprive the targets of their magic power, and these monsters will die soon without the power in their bodies." Pasha briefly described how this instrument worked and continued. "But it'll only become a mighty weapon when it's activated by the Chosen One."

Roland caught the keyword immediately. "Deprive them of their magic power? So does it mean that it'll do no harm to normal animals? Can God's Stones influence the instrument?"

"No, it directly affects magic power, and God's Stones can't do anything about it at all."

Learning that this instrument could affect an area within a radius of over 5,000 miles without causing any side effects to living beings without magic power, Roland had to admit it was really an environmentally friendly weapon. Unfortunately, however, its start-up requirement seemed too harsh.

He wondered whether the underground civilization had really tested this instrument's power or not. "Maybe they've just done it in theory? Otherwise, they wouldn't end up losing its relic in the war. Wait, did they create something they couldn't use? This kind of absurd things will only happen in this strange magic world."

Thinking that the underground civilization had an advanced magic theory and demons were able to cultivate various kinds of abilities, he realized human beings seemed to have no advantage in manipulating magic power at all. The witches were not a stable group. Their awakenings happened randomly among people and their abilities were hard to predict and control. Given that, he believed they still need a long time to evolve, but now there was not much time left for human beings.

Roland suspected that by the time the Taquila witches found the Chosen One, Neverwinter's armies equipped with advanced steel weapons had already gained an upper hand in the war against demons.

Despite all those thoughts, he would never try to deny the existence of magic power in this world.

He decided to carry out research on both science and magic power at the same time. In this way, the new findings of magic power would increase their productivity. In the meantime, the development of productivity would generate more resources for the studies on magic power.

He believed all research projects could be successfully carried out as long as there was plenty of money and manpower, including the one on magic power.

Now that he knew the basic situation of the Taquila survivors, he thought it was time to negotiate with them.

He said, "Pasha, thank you for telling me your situation and research results. As demons are obviously our common enemy, we should work together and pool our resources to fight against them. How about we building a united front of Divine Will to further our cooperation and coordination?"

Pasha tapped with her tentacles. "I agree. We only hope Your Majesty will continue your policy to gather more witches. All the Taquila witches want is to find the Chosen One among them. We'll send another God's Punishment Witch to bring you a new Five-Colored Stone."

"I'll continue the policy anyway. Even if you don't say that, I'm still going to expand the witch organization in my kingdom, but..." He paused for a while. "I think you'd better move to another place, such as the western mountains near Neverwinter."

"Well..."

Before Pasha gave her answer, all the witches in the reception hall stirred. "Your Majesty?"

"What about demonic beasts?"

At this moment, all the witches were staring at him. Some seemed worried and some nervous. Only Agatha gave him an approving look as if she had known that he was going to make such a request.

Roland surveyed them and signal the witches to calm down and relax. After that, he turned to look at Pasha on the light curtain again and said, "To be honest, I can't agree with your plan to protect the relic on your own. Once you lose it, all human beings' efforts will be wasted. Demonic beasts aren't tough enemies, but without the defensive line in Hermes, are you sure you can protect the relic when demons launch a surprise attack on you?"

Having heard that the underground civilization diminished probably because they lost its part of the relic, he thought it was better to put this thing under his own protection or somewhere near him. He would feel better if he would be able to send an army to support them immediately when they were attacked.

Celine seemed to be disagreeable. "As long as we change the annihilation core, demons will become easy targets as demonic beasts."

"No, they won't. Demons are way more powerful and intelligent than demonic hybrids. I can tell from the packed dead bodies that those demonic beasts were once very close to your core region. If I guess correctly, the Instrument of Divine Retribution isn't far away from the phantom instrument." Roland noticed that the little tentacles on Pasha stiffened for a moment when she heard this sentence. "If some Mad Demons who can throw spears attack you guys, how many magic cores will be able to remain intact?"

"But..."

Roland continued to explain patiently, "If you still think I won't do any better than you or worry about that demonic beasts would be attracted by the relic, you can settle down on the side of the western mountains close to the Fertile Plains and I'll build a road to connect your place with Neverwinter. In that case, I'll be able to help you whenever you're in trouble: Trust is the foundation of cooperation, and placing the relic where both parties regard as safe is the first step to build our mutual trust, isn't it?"

Pasha remained speechless with her tentacles intertwined with those of the other blobs. They seemed to be communicating with each other rapidly in this way. After seven or eight minutes, she started to talk again.

"Before I give our reply, I'd like to ask a question first. If we do form a united front of... Divine Will as you said, who'll lead us to fight against demons?"

Chapter 738: Only One Leader

Surprised by this sudden question, Roland fell silent for a moment and then asked with a smile, "You seem to have something else to say?"

Pasha replied, "As this united front is related to the survival of all human beings, we hope that every decision we make here can be given full consideration. To this end... we the survivors of Taquila suggest we adopt a co-governance mechanism for the united front. Under such a system, all decisions will be jointly made by the heads of the most powerful groups after negotiation. By doing so, we'll be able to avoid misjudgment and ensure an equal interest of every party."

"Uhm... it sounds like the Union's Three Chiefs system."

The ancient witch further explained, "A triumvirate can ensure a quick and well-balanced decision-making process, but it's not the only choice. Regarding the current situation, we'd better build a system to include the Four Kingdoms and all the witch organizations. In the early days of the Union, there were 11 leaders planning our military campaigns at the roundtable."

Hearing this, Roland had to admit they were quite clever in this matter since this co-governance mechanism they proposed would surely guarantee their own status in the united front. At this moment, except his Graycastle, all the kingdoms and witch organizations such as the Witch Union and Sleeping Island could hardly compete with the Taquila survivors who had taken over all the magic power instruments left by the underground civilization

and owned over 100 God's Punishment Witches. They had accumulated rich fighting experiences during a decades-long battle against demons and were overwhelmingly powerful when fighting with other witches and common armies.

Roland believed that if he agreed, the Taquila witches would naturally become one of the policymakers of the co-governance system. They would further ensure their own interests by stressing their identities as witches to gain recognition from and establish good relationships with the other witch organizations.

He thought that they made such a request probably because they wanted to protect themselves not because they were planning something like restoring their rule over human beings or overthrowing the kingdoms. He understood that every group would be prudent and want such a self-protecting measure before joining in a large organization. If he had been the old Prince Roland who had recently become a lord of Border Town, he would have accepted this suggestion of the Taquila witches, but now he was different.

With an air of authority, he said, "An interesting suggestion, but the united front won't adopt a co-governance mechanism. It'll have only one leader. That is me. This is the most efficient and reliable way of managing it."

He agreed that modesty was a virtue but also knew that now was not the right time for him to be humble, since he was clear that the Three Chiefs system might be a good choice for the Union but not for him.

He was the only one in this world, who knew what industrialization was and how to make the best use of all the resources in his domain.

To see rapid industrialization, he had to make all his administrative departments do what he said and work together like a set of machines toward the same goal. He wanted that every order issued by his City Hall to smoothly reach all his subjects and all the resources within his domain to be allocated and managed in accordance with his plan. Adopting a co-governance system under which he would have to explain and convince all the other policymakers to carry out a policy obviously would slow down the process of industrialization.

Seeing Roland reject Taquila's idea outright and bluntly, all the people in the meeting was fell into an awkward silence, including those ancient witches.

Roland cleared his throat and calmly continued. "The united front is built to guarantee that we'll work together to fight against demons, but I don't require you to join in it at the very beginning. I want you to move to the Western Region to build mutual trust first. As compared to some oral agreement, the facts you'll see here will be more convincing."

"What... are we going to see?"

He explained, "You're going to see our strength and determination to fight against demons and the current situation of some other organizations, both those that are a part of the united front and those not. After that, you can make a decision to join in

or not. Even if you don't join in, we'll still be able to cooperate on many other projects, such as experiments and the search for the Chosen One. I promise I won't interfere with your internal affairs."

Celine interrupted, "You won't mind if we don't give you the relic and the magic core?"

"No, and in fact, I've never planned to depend on those instruments in the ruins of the maze to defeat demons. Regarding the relic, as long as it's kept in a safe place, I won't have a problem with it. Like I said, working together to look for the Chosen One and protect the relic is the first step to build our mutual trust. As for further cooperation, we can take it slow."

The cold voice which remained silent for a long time appeared again. "I've got to say you're very uncommon, you common man, but have you ever thought that controlling the united front on your own can be very risky. If the Battle of Divine Will lasts decades and during this period of time you inevitably become old and weak, how can you ensure that your successors will follow your will to lead us in the war? Only a co-governance mechanism can effectively prevent such a problem."

"I don't think it'll be a problem at all. I'm not sure how long will the war last, but I'm afraid my life will be longer than all of yours combined." At this moment, he felt he needed to bluff, although he was not sure whether he had got Zero's lifespan as he obviously did not get her magic power. He knew that to convince these ancient witches, he had better explain his decision with some incredible power rather than persuading them that a special system which they had never heard of would guarantee that his successors would

carry on his work.

He described to them the Soul Battlefield in detail and many witches chimed in. After that, there was a long silence.

He saw that the tentacles of the blobs knotted together again and the scales on their bodies turned from grayish brown to reddish brown, which indicated that they had a heated discussion now.

After a long time, their tentacle hang down.

Pasha said solemnly, "I understand, but we need at least a month to move all the things we need. I hope you can offer us some building materials as one cave isn't enough for all our things. We need to build a palace and a laboratory inside the western mountains."

Roland was surprised and asked, "Wait a minute, how can you build something like that underground?" It was not easy to conduct an underground construction, for the environment below the earth was wet and dark. As such he had planned to ask Lotus to connect some underground caves in the western mountains for the Taquila survivors since their bodies would not require very comfortable living conditions. However, they seemed to have mastered better construction skills than him and even planned to build a new palace underground.

Pasha explained, "Our devouring worm will do the job. It's a big shell looking like a wild beast. We've got one in the ruins. That was the shell we used to sneak into the City of Glow in the Kingdom of

Dawn."

Chapter 739: The Handshake

Roland felt a jolt, thinking, "Why do these things sound similar to the giant demonic beast in the snow mountain?"

When he was about to raise this question, Agatha asked Pasha, "Are you the ones who entered the Devil's Town and devoured the Blackstone Pagoda?"

Pasha was confused, saying, "Devil's... Town? No, we didn't. We've only used our devouring worm to mend the ruins and build the tunnel to the City of Glow. We can't afford to use it so frequently since it eats a lot."

Roland described the witches' adventures in the Misty Forest and the Devil's Town located to the west of the Western Region. After that, he asked Scroll to take out the pictures of the scenes drawn by Soraya and explained, "this monster, much bigger than any wild beast, seemed to move toward the great snow mountain."

Seeing the vivid pictures, Pasha took a deep breath and said, "Yes, it's indeed a devouring worm. I'm afraid that there're also some ruins left by the underground civilization in the snow mountain you mentioned. According to the literatures we read here, this civilization once could be found everywhere in the Land of Dawn. This record is reliable, as now we can easily find tracks and numerous tunnels left by devouring worms in every high mountain."

"But you think the underground civilization has already

perished."

"Yes, we do, but the worm was just a shell like an original carrier. A soul can get into it and then move it."

Hearing this, Roland's heart sank in a sudden. He glanced around and found all the witches in the reception hall looked solemn at this moment. Obviously, everybody guessed that the one who sent the worm to Agatha's research tower and the Devil's Town must be the unknown enemy in the Battle of Divine Will.

Roland wondered whether this enemy had happened to find the ruins and some worm shells in the snow mountain and transfer souls into those shells.

If this was the case, he believed it would not be a big problem.

However, if they had also found some magic cores and a central carrier, he believed he would have big trouble. Will these things drastically improve their magic theory and even enable them to create some Instrument of Divine Retribution against the witches?

He thought they had an excellent chance of finding some shells and even instruments in the snow mountain. Unlike the Impassible Mountain Range and the Dragonspine Mountain Range, it did not stretch very long, but its major peak was the highest mount in the Western Region. According to Pasha, such a great mountain was a perfect place to build a large underground city for the underground civilization. Given this, he decided that he must do something about it.

Celine anxiously said, "Your Majesty, please assist us in exploring the snow mountain as soon as possible, in case there're some remaining instruments."

"And the various kinds of shells recorded in the literature. If the unknown enemy gets them, I'm afraid it would cause us lots of trouble." Compared to Celine, Pasha still sounded calm, but all her tentacles were waving rapidly, showing her anxiety inside.

This news apparently caused a stir among the blobs, as it was getting noisy behind Pasha.

Roland quickly got why they were so excited.

Living in the God's Punishment Warriors' bodies for hundreds of years resembled being imprisoned in endless emptiness, which explained why they were so interested in the new carriers. However, compared with living in the bodies of God's Punishment Army, the carriers at least enabled them to have some feelings including a sense of smell, though they would not look like human beings anymore.

Roland pretended to hesitate, saying, "I see your point. I'd been planning to explore the snow mountain of the Western Region, but as I didn't have any suitable means of transport and didn't want the witches to take any risk, I had to postpone in the end. If I could get the help from your devouring worm for this exploration, I think it'll be a good opportunity..."

Pasha immediately promised, "We'll start to move as fast as we can."

Roland, who had been thinking about how to start the cooperation with the Taquila survivors, was also happy to get this chance. In fact, even if they didn't ask him to explore the mountain, he would do it sooner or later in order to eliminate potential threats around Neverwinter and satisfy his own curiosity toward the big carriers which were able to drill huge tunnels underground.

He could easily think of a long list of things these carriers could do.

He had planned to use the Impassable Mountain Range as a natural barrier against the demons, but current engineering techniques did not allow him to do so. The transportation of cement and bricks alone would be a tricky problem, as the mountain paths were rugged and sinuous and the weather condition there was very unstable. If some soldiers were garrisoned on the mountains, he would have to build barbette for them. Near the military facilities, he would also need to build barracks, roads, and necessary living facilities, which would be a big challenge for Hummingbird and Lotus.

However, if he had a devouring worm, he could solve all those problems by drilling a straight underground tunnel connecting the barbette on the mountain with Neverwinter and building underground ammunition reservoir and barracks which could keep them away from the snow storm. He could even build a railroad in the tunnel so that steam trailers could be used to

transport soldiers and goods.

With reinforced concrete blockhouses on the ground and convenient transportation lines underground, that would be the natural chasm defense line he wanted.

This devouring worm could also be used to build underground utilities and sewage discharge system for the city. When that happened, he would proudly announce that in this age, Neverwinter was the first city to have an underground drainage system in which people could walk freely. He believed that this worm would be praised highly as a magic tool in the civil engineering field before the invention of tunnel boring machine and would be considered as important as the magic core and the bio-computer.

Roland rose and walked to the light curtain, extending his right hand toward Pasha. "I hope this is the beginning of building our mutual trust."

"Your Majesty, this is..."

He looked at this monster who was several meters taller than himself and calmly explained, "It's a handshake, representing a preliminary agreement between us."

After a little hesitation, Pasha dropped the thickest tentacle on her head. It moved in a spiral and touched his palm in the end.

He thought, "What a pity. Soraya isn't here to witness and record this moment worthy being memorized forever."

When the image of Pasha started to distort, he suddenly asked, "Ah... wait, you said every high mountain might have ruins left by the underground civilization. What about the mountains in the deep sea?"

Pasha was surprised, saying, "Are there mountains under the sea? According to the literature, they did not go to the sea and only lived on the Land of Dawn. I think they might not be able to move around in the sea, as most of their carriers were heavy and clumsy. Why did you ask about this?"

"Nothing, I'm just curious." Roland shook his head and lost in thoughts.

They only lived on the Land of Dawn... so the weird underwater spire and telescope have nothing to do with the underground civilization, but who owns the Giant Stone Gates that Thunder saw through the old telescope and the land which only appears during flood tide? The unknown enemy in the Battle of Divine Will?

I hope Thunder can find the answer.

At this moment, the purple light curtain distorted and then disappeared.

The reception hall got back to normal.

Chapter 740: A Beautiful Night

As night fell, Wendy went to the door of Scroll's bedroom.

She held out her hand, hesitating whether she should knock or not. However, just at that moment, Scroll opened the door.

"I knew you would come find me." Scroll smiled. "I also wanted to talk to you, just like we used to."

Scroll had apparently taken an early shower as her long, wet hair was randomly hanging over her shoulders instead of being tied up. She had also placed a towel on her shoulders in order to avoid getting her night robe wet. At first glimpse, she appeared to be a little younger, with her flowing hair covering the wrinkles on her forehead. After leading an increasingly comfortable life in Neverwinter, she looked more mellow.

Only her wise and mature eyes remained unchanged.

Wendy could not help smiling and asked, "In your bedroom or mine?"

"Yours. Nightingale will come back much later than Leaf."

"Ok."

"You serve the Chaos Drinks."

"What?!?"

"Of course you do, whoever initiates the conversation is also responsible for the drinks. That's our old rule and you know it."

"So that's why you waited for me behind the door?"

"That's right. Patience is the most important thing and also one of the lessons I draw from life. Now, have you learned your lesson?"

"Fine..."

As they went back to Wendy's bedroom and cleared up the desk, Wendy took two glasses and a bottle of Chaos Drink out of a drawer and poured it into the glasses. The orange-red drinks reflected a flame-like light against the light from the Magic Stone.

"That's what you got?" Scroll took a sip of it. "You're lucky. In winter, it's as good as Fire Dragon Wine..."

"I'm jealous of you." Wendy stretched her hands.

"Don't put it like that. We can enjoy such a drink thanks to Miss Evelyn."

Roland figured out a very interesting way to distribute the Chaos

Drinks of various tastes to each witch of the Witch Union. Each witch in each month had an opportunity to pick up a bottle of the Chaos Drinks created by Evelyn. No one knew what kind of flavor they would get as they would only see a number before the draw was revealed.

Therefore, on that day, the witches used to exchange their drinks or drink others'. Somehow, Maggie always got the most popular drink, making everyone wonder if Evelyn had revealed it to her.

As they took their time to enjoy the orange-red drink that warmed their hearts, they heard the sound of the cold wind outside the windows. They felt tipsy in the warm bedroom. They talked little as they could understand each other just by looking at one another.

In fact, Wendy had nothing specific to say and just felt very happy at the moment. When she closed her eyes, Roland Wimbledon's earlier declaration would appear in her mind.

"Only I can be the leader."

Before this, Roland, in her opinion, was very approachable. She was concerned that he would mess up or show weakness on some critical issues, which was unbecoming of a king. But now, he was much better than she had expected. Judging from his tone and expression in dealing with other people, he had become more mature and developed his compelling authority thanks to the last two years of experience.

To her surprise, Roland was much better at being a dominator. Even so, he treated the witches and common people the same as before. It seemed that it was his nature to be nice to witches, which was very odd, especially for a royal noble.

She knew that Scroll also had felt this change, so she had waited at the door for her.

It was a habit they had kept since they were in the Witch Cooperation Association. When they had some good news to share, Wendy, Scroll, and Cara would always get together to drink some cheap ale and talk about it overnight. However, they had to drink wild fruit-water instead of ale when their conditions became worse later on.

Sadly, they gradually talked about their concerns and problems instead of good news or plans because Cara had a different purpose from them, leaving Wendy and Scroll behind. As the eldest witches and the founders of the Witch Cooperation Association, Wendy and Scroll had to be strong because if they gave up, all witches would lose their faith in seeking for Holy Mountain. That was how they survived through all the suffering and tough times.

And now, those times became the past once more.

Wendy drank out of the drink, let out a deep sigh, and said, "Well, after the meeting, I handed the test results of the witches from the Kingdom of Wolfheart to His Majesty."

"Oh? What kind of abilities do they have?" Scroll leaned on the

bench and replied casually.

Wendy gave a general description of each of their abilities but was deliberately vague when it came to Broken Sword. "Can you guess who he assigned Broken Sword to?"

"Uh, probably Nightingale or Ashes...only they can make full use of Broken Sword's power." After some more thought, Scroll said, "Anna and Leaf indeed have strong magic power, but they and other witches aren't able to fight against enemies face to face. Additionally, there are few combat witches in the Witch Union."

"Great minds think alike, but His Majesty didn't think so." Wendy revealed her gentle smile. "He didn't assign Broken Sword to anyone."

Scroll was stunned. "Why?"

"According to him, a weapon needs to be carried by the owner personally at all times, but in that case, Broken Sword would have limited freedom. Besides, the enemies won't always launch an attack at her working time and her sword's aura isn't as powerful as gunpowder. Hence, she can partner with each witch to test their overlapping effects rather than to be a weapon. Then, based on how interesting the combination is, His Majesty will assign her job."

"Assign her a job based on how interesting the combination is?"

"Yeah, those were His Majesty's words exactly."

He attached more importance to her feelings instead of giving her a role that limited her. Perhaps, that was the reason why Nightingale chose to support him with her wholeheartedly.

Now in hindsight, it was fortunate that they chose to believe Nightingale's judgment.

Thinking of this, Wendy could not help smiling. After filling her glass again, she held it before Scroll. "To us, for finding such a good king."

Scroll smiled, holding the glass to gently clink hers. "Yes, to our Holy Mountain."

"Ah... it's empty." Having drunk the last sip, she found that the bottle had been emptied out when she wanted to fill the glass again.

"Do you want me to return to my room to get mine?" Scroll also wanted to continue drinking.

"No, we must follow the old rule." She waved her hands and took a bottle from another drawer. "But next time, I'll wait for you to knock on my door."

"Wait a moment. Isn't that Nightingale's?"

"Yes, but she doesn't mind at all."

They cheered up again and continued to talk on this warm and wonderful night.

Chapter 741: The Art of Sound Transmission.....

...

Roland wiped the fine sweat beads from Anna's forehead and held her in his arms.

In the dim light, he could still see the attractive blush on her face.

Roland had the feeling that Anna had become more active in this regard since the last time they talked about the Dream World. She also tried to learn some new tricks—though her progress was much slower than her learning from books. Anna's clumsy and serious manner gave him an entirely new experience. His visual enjoyment far surpassed the sensory experience and he could not help but feel a sense of superiority as an old hand.

Of course, they would not miss the storytelling session after their time of joy.

As he was indulging in Anna's fragrance, Roland started to narrate in detail the news brought by the Taquila Witches as well as his speculation about the Battle of Divine Will.

"Although we've already known that where we live is no larger than a corner of the mainland, I didn't expect that there were actually completely different civilizations scattered beneath the mountains... this world is really full of unknowns!" Anna sighed

and said, "Perhaps one day, we can also set foot on that faraway land to see what kind of secrets are hidden in that world across the sea."

"I promise that day will come," Roland answered with a smile.

Even if they could not travel by sea, they could still fly over it—any land that could be seen through the telescope would not be too far away. As long as they had the internal combustion engine, the large airship could come into play.

"But does God really exist? He left relics causing us to fight against one another... maybe he is now looking at us from somewhere."

"Are you afraid?" Roland could not resist holding her even closer.

"No, I want to thank him."

"What for?" Roland was a little surprised.

"For he sent you to me." Anna looked up and whispered.

Roland saw the rippling blue lake in her eyes—that was her unconcealed emotions.

He felt a warm current surging in his heart.

"I'll always be with you."

"But you can't stay with me all the time."

"I..."

Anna covered his mouth before he could finish speaking.

"You're the king and also the future commander of the army that will combat the Army of Demons. How could you stay forever in Neverwinter? I can't possess you entirely just for my personal desire. The soldiers who fight in the front line need to see your presence and your subjects in the other cities want you to be with them," she said softly, "Roland, I'm already very content that I can listen to your stories like this."

Roland was silent for a moment. "You're right. But wherever I am in the future, you will always be able to hear my stories... I promise you this."

Anna blinked, as if she had heard the meaning behind his words. "Without the Sigil of Listening?"

"Exactly." He nodded.

How could they speak out their words of love if they had to communicate through the Sigil of Listening?

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll let you know tomorrow." Roland rolled over and lay on top of Anna, then kissed her neck... and slipped all the way from her neck to the clavicle, leaving a shallow mark on her fine, tight skin. "But, now it's my turn."

Once again, they became one, and their sweet breathing sounds rising and falling for a long time before fading away.

...

The next day after breakfast, the invigorated Roland walked into the backyard of North Slope Mountain with Anna.

"Good morning, Your Majesty." Lucia, who had arrived even earlier, put her work aside and bowed before him.

"Good morning, Your Majesty! Good morning, Sister Anna! Sister Nightingale!" Ring followed the actions of her sister, and started to bow and cry out cheerfully.

Roland waved his hand with a smile, indicating that they did not have to be too formal. Then he walked to the workbench and pulled out a piece of white paper on which he started to draw a design. He intended to carry out the promise he had made last night to Anna before the Taquila survivors moved to the Western Region—a communication tool that he could use to speak to Anna at any time without magic.

That would be the wire telephone.

The principle of the telephone was very simple and that was the most basic application of electromagnetic induction: the sound wave would vibrate the metal reed in the voice tube causing the change of the magnetic flux formed in the magnetic field, and finally a fluctuant induced current would be generated. While the earpiece, on the contrary, would use the magnetic force generated by the electromagnetic coil to vibrate the membrane and reduce the current into voice.

In other words, it was fundamentally the same as a generator or an electric motor, except that the latter turned the vibration into a rotation and had a much larger power.

As soon as he articulated his idea and design, Anna immediately understood how this unprecedented calling tool worked.

"Let me get Mystery Moon and Soraya!" Her eyes shone with excitement.

"Electric current... exchange with voice?" After hearing what Roland had said, Nightingale still had a vacant look on her face, and when she turned to see if Lucia had understood, she found Lucia was also pondering.

"Electricity and magnetism originate from each other, and the magnetism turns into power... I see."

Even the little girl Ring also showed off her knowledge. "Sister, are you talking about something in the second chapter of 'Elementary Physics'?"

All of these reactions suddenly frustrated Nightingale. She gloomily picked up a dried fish and walked into the Mist.

Roland could not hold back his laughter at this scene. He knew that although the principle was simple, it was not that easy to make a functional phone, and the problem lay in the signal transmission.

The electrical signal would abate.

That was the reason why the phone was not widely used in the early stage after it was invented—once the distance between the callers was too long, it was hard for one side to hear exactly what the other side was saying. The phone was not widely used until the electron tube that could amplify the signal was invented.

Roland was not very good at electricity, so he barely wrote about it in his books. Even now that he had the help of the Dream World, he still found it quite problematic to make an electron tube.

Since he did not intend to amplify the signal, there was only one way to do it—by reducing the attenuation.

For example, increase the size of the wire and reduce the loss of

the signal in the route.

The former was very simple to achieve. The required copper wire could be accurately processed by Anna's Blackfire. According to the knowledge he had acquired from his Dream World, a 4 mm diameter wire could be used to maintain a 50 or 60 km communication without a repeater, while the general telephone connecting wire was only 0.4 to 0.6 mm in diameter. Although it was somewhat wasteful to use the thick wire, it could effectively avoid the trouble of having to make a signal amplifier.

The latter could be achieved through coaxial-cable—the so-called coaxial-cable was made by wrapping the wire with a layer of metal mesh which would be sandwiched by the two wires that were coated with insulating materials and turned into a Faraday cage so as to minimize the divergence of the electrical signal. Before the telephone came into widespread use, the technology of wrapping the metal layer was not mature yet, so at that time, people used the loading coil, which meant overlapping the wire with a spirally wound coil casing to reduce the signal loss. But Roland did not need to follow this rule since he had Anna's processing skill and Soraya's special coating that could complete it in one step.

Chapter 742: Love From a Distance

Combining the two techniques should allow the telephone signal to be read as far as a few hundred kilometers without a relay, which basically lets it cover most of the residential areas in the Western Region, and would allow Neverwinter to receive real-time updates from the defensive line in the Impassable Mountain Range.

If he wanted to further extend the range, he would then have to use a signal relay.

The reason why Roland chose to develop the wire telephone was not only because he was inspired by Anna's words, but also because of the vast usage and practicability of this tool. It would serve as a crucial piece for controlling the political situation, enhancing the centralization of the government, and commanding the wartime efforts.

More importantly, the industrial projects in Neverwinter had already reached a saturation point.

The new immigrants still had to pass the primary education before they can be absorbed into the various industries. The four major industries—civil construction, mineral processing, machine manufacturing, and chemical production—had occupied over 90% of the workforce. According to current predictions, it would not be difficult for these four industries to employ 60,000 to 70,000 new immigrants once they pass through primary education.

As these industries were vital for future war efforts, their production could not be interrupted. On the other hand, the bicycle plant, which was enthusiastically built by Roland in the beginning, wasn't even able to meet the demand of the First Army. The city hall would first shut down the bicycle factory whenever there is a power shortage and reallocate the workers to the steam engine plant whenever there is a shortage of manpower.

Even though construction on Kingdom Main Street and Route 67 had already been completed, and Border Area neither raised horses nor stables for horses to rest in, the roads were still mainly used by carriages that came from the Longsong Area or other cities. Also, with the construction of the railway already underway, the citizens never did start riding bicycles between the Border Area and the Longsong Area.

Of course, Roland would never admit to Barov that he had made this strategic mistake. Since then, he would always take into account of Neverwinter's production capability when planning for new facilities.

The phone happened to be a good product that wouldn't burden Neverwinter's output, and it also does not require much maintenance.

First of all, Roland would not provide telephone to the market. He would only provide it for military communication purposes and basic communication between the Border Area and the Longsong Area. Roland only intended to lay down a one-to-one cable that connects both sides. In this way, it would save him the time and energy of setting up a complex wire network.

Secondly, starting with a limited number of telephone systems meant that it would only require Anna, Mystery Moon, and Soraya to help out during their spare time without having to utilize Neverwinter's labour force.

Moreover, once they manage to produce vacuum tubes, they could develop telecommunication for the public.

Therefore, the wire telephone is the most appropriate project to start with before exploring the Great Snow Mountain with the Taqila survivors.

...

The prototyping stage of manufacturing phones went smoother than he had expected. By afternoon, two basic telephones containing magnetic speakers appeared in the backyard of North Slope Mountain.

It had no shell and looked like an assembly of a coil of wire and magnets. It was equipped with a hand-operated generator and a "Mini Dawn" battery. Due to the low power requirements, the battery was only as thick as a finger and could last for at least a month, saving him from the trouble of making an independent dry battery.

"How does this work?" Mystery Moon asked curiously, "Can my ability really do this?"

Roland naturally ignored the second half of her sentence. "It's very simple. Watch carefully... This hand-operated generator is used to start a call. When the user rotates it quickly..." He grabs the handle and rotates it forcibly, and the magnetic bell on the other side suddenly rang out a sound of "jingling". "That ringing means that there's a call coming."

He gave Anna a glance, and she picked up the earpiece and the voice tube.

"When the earpiece is picked up and the switch pops up, it means the voice line is connected and people on both sides can start talking. The current that transmits the electrical signals is provided by Mini Dawn, so without this copper bar enchanted by Mystery Moon, the telephone can only ring but no sound would be transmitted."

"Oh, I see!" Mystery Moon thrust her chest out and vigorously nodded her head twice.

"Your Majesty, may I try speaking through it?" Soraya was eager to try.

"And me." Ring raised her hand up high.

"Of course... It was created by all of you, and naturally, you're eligible to be the first few to experience this era-defining communication tool." Roland laughed. There was no need to explain the significance of the phone, since it completely changed

how humans could communicate with each other across distant worlds. "There will be no signal attenuation in such a small yard, so connecting the phone with ordinary copper wire will do."

In a quiet, snow-covered forest, a crisp bell rang out continuously. Obviously, they could talk through the phone directly, but they insisted on starting over again, from the step of rotating the handle to generate electricity.

"There really is a voice!"

"It sounds like Lucia!"

"Uh, what should I say?"

"Let her guess who you are!"

The witches, who were separated by the wall, were vying to shout at the voice tube. For a few moments, peals of laughter echoed from both ends of the yard.

Roland also tried out listening twice. To be honest, he thought the prototype wasn't very good. The voice he heard fluctuated a lot and there was a lot of static. Anyways, it was definitely not up to standard. But he knew that as long as he kept adjusting the size of the metal reed and the space between the electromagnets, he would find the right parameters for the best call quality.

Soon, the voice tube reached Roland's hand once again.

He shook his head with a smile and placed the earpiece beside his ear and habitually said, "Hello?"

He heard nothing but interference from the weak conductance of the copper cable.

For some reason, he knew who it was on the other side of the phone as if their hearts were linked.

"Anna...?" Roland whispered.

After a moment, he heard a slightly distorted reply.

"I like you... Roland."

After protecting Roland for a whole day, Nightingale returned to her bedroom in a bad mood.

This was not the first time she felt like this because she did not understand anything that the others were saying. And every time this happened, only dried fish and ice cream bread could comfort her.

Well... now there were also the Chaos Drinks.

She truly envied the intimacy between Roland and Anna. Meanwhile, a faint but unceasing bitterness flooded her. She thought that she would get used to it sooner or later, but it turned out to be harder than she had imagined.

The more invested she got in her feelings, the deeper the thorns dug into her heart.

Now Nightingale somewhat understood what Wendy had told her.

She walked to the table and pulled open the drawer, but she found out that the bottle inside was empty.

Did I take the wrong one?

So she pulled open another drawer and found that bottle inside was empty too.

"Wendy? My Chaos..." As soon as Nightingale turned around, she was hugged by her roommate, and Wendy's ample bosom almost squeezed her out of breath.

"Nightingale, how many years have we known each other? You've been with me since you left the Gilen Family in Silver City, right?"

"Yeah... almost four or five years, but my Chaos..."

"We've experienced so many dangers and hardships along the way before today. Nothing can undermine our friendship, right?"

"Of course, I've always treated you like a sister, but my Chaos..."

"I drank all your drinks. I'm sorry!" Wendy held her even closer. "I'll definitely make it up to you with my share next month."

What? All of them?

Nightingale fumbled the bag of dried fish and felt that it was empty too.

Only dried fish, ice cream bread, and Chaos Drinks can comfort her.

Now, all of them were gone.

Nightingale heard a crack in her heart.

In an instant, the bitterness flooded her once again.

Chapter 743: The Desert Mission

Even with his eyes closed, Iron Axe could still smell the unique odor of the yellow sands around him.

Today was the fourth day since he had entered the desert and the third week since his army had left Neverwinter. After the end of this week, two-thirds of the winter season would have passed and the coldest period, mid-winter, would start. However, unlike the snowy Western Region, the Months of Demons had less influence here, leaving the area almost untouched. Although the sky maintained a shade of oppressive gray, there was at least no piercing northerly wind and icy snow that could freeze the whole desert.

As Silver Stream did not converge with any other rivers and flowed mainly underground, the army had no choice but to make its way on foot. Rather than following the original plan, which was to wait for the 500 new recruits who were stationed in the Palisade City to be ready and then incorporating them into the army to move together, Iron Axe decided to leave those recruits to Brian and marched alone so that he could reach Iron Sand City faster.

Recruits might perform well during on-the-spot firing, but they would not be able to survive a journey of continuous marching on foot. Moreover, the situation would barely be improved even with the addition of 500 people.

He understood very well that His Majesty's mission could not be accomplished by cannon attack or aggression. The First Army would be there to ensure victory, but it would not be the means to

conquer the Sand Nation.

Mojins had a set of traditional solutions.

As for the 500 recruits, all they needed to do was seize Silver Stream Oasis to ensure that the frontline troops would not be flanked.

In the Southernmost Region, an oasis was a lifeline. Whether people intended to attack or flee, they could not live without an oasis.

The tribal people of the Sand Nation could feel the formidable vigor coming from the veteran soldiers who were marching orderly on the road even without witnessing the power of the flintlocks. No one dared to walk up and question the soldiers coming from Graycastle but just whispered behind them after they had filled their water packs, got fed, and set out again.

Iron Axe estimated that, at this rate, the First Army should be able to reach Iron Sand City before nightfall.

"I'm a little confused. Can one initiate the so-called holy duel at any time in any season?" A beautiful blonde woman walked toward Echo and her fine skin was in sharp contrast to that of the princess of the Osha clan. "Even noblemen could refuse the honor challenge between themselves if they were unwell. On such a cold day, everyone would want to stay near a warm stove the entire day instead of going out and fighting, right? I mean... what should we do if someone refuses the request for a holy duel?"

Iron Axe remembered the lady's name was Andrea, a combat witch who often followed Princess Tilly. As His Majesty once said, there ought to be just one Extraordinary, Ashes, to help them, but somehow Andrea ended up joining the campaign as well.

"No matter how unwilling you are, you have to fight when someone picks up an axe, rushes into your house, and kicks your stove." Ashes curled her lip. "Do you think this contest which, to some extent, determines the life and death of a clan will follow the hypocritical rules of the nobility?"

"That's called a sneak attack or a massacre, not a duel," Andrea said disdainfully, "even though Mojins are barbarians, they're still able to distinguish between the two. Do you think that everyone is as ignorant as you?"

"I can see you really are a 'well-learned person' by saying that in front of Echo."

"Stop misinterpreting my words!"

Iron Axe was not bothered about being called a barbarian as he knew that people in Border Town were not judged by their identities. This was something His Majesty had told him personally. Other than being a Mojin, he had a more important identity and that was being a resident of Neverwinter.

Iron Axe did not respond to the dispute between Ashes and Andrea until he received Echo's gaze calling for help. He cleared

his throat and explained voluntarily. "Lady Andrea's concern was not misplaced. Certainly, the holy duel can't be refused and must be done when both opponents are well prepared to earn the approval from the Three Gods. But it doesn't mean that the duel can be initiated at any time by anyone's will. The first requirement for the duel is that the challenger must be qualified to fight."

"What kind of qualifications are needed?"

"First of all, it must be an entire Mojin clan," Iron Axe said briefly, "One person can't represent a clan and this rule applies to even a chief or a princess. This rule is to prevent a situation where a dozen people occupy one-sixth of Iron Sand City. In addition, the rule also excludes foreigners. Iron Sand City allows foreigners to fight for the clans but excludes them from the central power positions."

"Does that mean that we are not eligible at all?" Ashes raised her eyebrow. "It has been years since Echo was exiled and the Osha clan has disappeared long ago. Or should we start by looking for her surviving clansmen?"

"No one is able to survive Endless Cape," Iron Axe said as he shook his head, "but we can use another method. For example, making Lady Silvermoon the chief of a new clan is allowed."

"Is this... possible?" Andrea was surprised.

"Mojins don't value bloodlines like you people do. They value one's ability more than lineage." The commander-in-chief of the

First Army said calmly, "After satisfying the first criterion, any clan that is able to stand their ground in one of the small oases around the Iron Sand City qualifies for the duel. There are a total of four small oases that newly rising clans always fight in and that's why these four oases are also called the bloodstained place."

"They are like admission tickets, right?" Ashes did not take it seriously.

"You could say that. In fact, these clans generally fall into two categories," Iron Axe paused, "challenger... and watchdog."

"Watchdog?" The blonde witch's curiosity was piqued.

"These are the obstacles set by the top clans who are unwilling to see the order in Iron Sand City change too much." Echo was the one who replied this time. "They rely on their huge resources and influence to recruit a large number of warriors to form a mixed clan that has its roots in the small oases. Watchdogs won't seek a holy duel with their owners, yet they occupy the positions of the challenger. Despite not being allowed to enter Iron Sand City, they live quite well relying on the water and food supplied by the small oases."

"They sound like hounds that are willing to eat leftovers." Ashes sneered. "That is a very appropriate name."

"As the holy duel is full of variables, the big clans would try to rope in or bribe the potential challengers stationed in the bloodstained place. My father was reluctant to be a watchdog so he

was determined to initiate a holy duel with Iron Whip clan, yet he ended up with..." Echo's voice became despondent as she was reminded of her distressing past.

"They'll pay for their insidious behavior that year, Lady Silvermoon." Iron Axe comforted her. "Death is coming for them now."

"So we need to find a challenger first, whose chief will be replaced by Echo, before we challenge the six big clans?" Andrea asked.

"Once people start to settle down, they'll lose their motivation to go forward. One who has occupied a small oasis and doesn't challenge others immediately will very likely become a new watchdog. After that, it won't be easy to overpower him by words or by force," Iron Axe said slowly, "since we are under the king's order and carrying thunder and grace with us, there is no need to do it in such an inconvenient way. Any humble clan will become unstoppable with the First Army backing it up. We will just crush anyone who dares to stand in His Majesty's way."

Chapter 744: One Who Seeks a Revenge

Thuram's favorite activity was sitting on the second floor of a tavern and watching customers coming and going downstairs.

This was his tavern and his territory, so Thuram named it "Skull Cup" for his own preference and re-decorated it. He even hung a string of incomplete skulls at the entrance as the sign of the tavern.

However, it was not called this name five years ago.

"What was it called at that time?" Thuram wondered.

"Was it called Elf Forest... or Elf Garden? Anyway, it doesn't matter now." Thuram drank some spirits with fire lantern fruit in them, letting the hot taste flood his tongue. "Such a delicate name didn't fit the bloodstained place, since there's no elf or elf-like woman here but quite a lot of bones."

After each battle, a pile of dead bodies would be left outside the Iron Sand City. He preferred bones, especially the skulls, which had been baked in hot sands, rather than perishable flesh.

First, the skulls were intimidating, so it would let troublemakers understand what kind of place this was.

Second, it indeed could hold wine, saving him from buying more wine glasses.

After all, the former did not work for everyone. There were always some idiots born with deformed brains who thought that they could treat everywhere like their own backyards and that their adversaries were no better than women who knew nothing but weeping. In a place where troublemakers appeared frequently, brittle pottery and glass were not ideal vessels.

Gazing at every customer was a habit that Thuram had developed in recent years. People who traveled in and out of this land were generally divided into three kinds: the half-dead ones, the moribund ones, and the dead ones—he preferred to distinguish people in this way rather than by their identities. The half-dead ones' purpose of coming here was very simple, which was drinking, gambling, and women; as long as they maintained their current state, they could basically finish the rest of their journeys. The moribund ones were mostly watchdogs or challengers who came to inquire about the situation. They had already put their lives under the blades that would swing and behead them at any time.

As to the dead ones... they were undoubtedly the troublemakers.

Thuram's attention was fixed on neither the half-dead ones nor the dead ones, for the former were very boring, and the latter gave him joy only when they were dying. It was the moribund ones he liked most because he could see in them a mirror image of his younger self.

At that time, he was just like them, holding a sharp knife in his hand and fighting in the bloodstained place, an admiring place for

many clans, yet he always had his sights set on Iron Sand City.

His courage, audacity, and strength were being drained from him until one day someone replaced him as the new owner of the small oasis... He had to beg for a chance to survive. At last, he became part of the bloodstained place, yet he turned from the moribund one into the half-dead one during this alteration.

The moribund ones, though they had already placed their lives under the blades, still had the chance to skyrocket when the time came. They could break out of the cocoons or rise from the ashes. But the half-dead ones would never have this kind of opportunity. They could only seek some form of entertainment to comfort them for the rest of their lives.

Such as, watching the travelers who pass by these oases... who might perish in the sands or take over as the new owner of this place.

At this moment, one of his men pushed open the door, walked to him, and whispered in his ear.

"Oh? Are you sure about that?" Thuram was startled.

"He said so, and from the look of the woman beside him... she is probably a Divine Lady."

Thuram pondered for a while, then a malicious smile appeared on his face. "Take them in. Remember to take away their weapons.

This guy is a hard nut to crack."

"Yes."

"See? There's a big fun coming now," Thuram could not help thinking.

...

There were a total of two visitors whose bodies were hidden under loose ropes, but Thuram could still distinguish that they were a man and a woman. When the tall man took off his hood and showed his face, Thuram could not help but squint. "I didn't expect to see you one day, Iron Axe."

"The things that you can't expect are way more than stars reflected on the oasis. Nothing strange about that." Iron Axe served the woman her seat, and then calmly walked over to sit opposite him. "But now... you should know what I'm coming for."

"Probably." Thuram shrugged. As an old citizen of Sand Nation, he knew every holy duel held in the Land of Fire. Some of the moribund ones could indeed rise from ashes, but most of them turned into complete dead bodies, and the Osha clan was one of them... Although he had heard that some accidents happened during the duel, it made no difference to the end result. "But you shouldn't have returned, for Iron Whip clan is no longer the way it was."

Thuram had thought of recruiting Iron Axe who used to be quite a renowned hybrid warrior—Thuram didn't let his initial ambition die away even after he had to serve a watchdog, and he always imagined that his clan would one day reoccupy the small oasis and enter the holy land of the duel.

But it was years ago.

But now... he just wanted to have some fun.

"Yeah? That's exactly what I want," Iron Axe said with disapproval, "I thought they'd been thrown out of Iron Sand City by the other challengers and were now rotting away in some isolated corner. Now it seems that the Three Gods haven't completely fallen asleep."

Thuram frowned, for he did not remember that this hybrid warrior was a man of grandiloquence. "I understand your eagerness for the revenge. But a revenge carried out by someone who's not qualified is nothing less than suicide." As he said this, he turned to look at the silent woman. "Even though the Osha clan owns a Divine Lady, it won't narrow the gap between your clan and the Iron Whip Clan. Moreover, since most of the exiles of that year had already died, what difference can you make with just the two of you?"

"That's why I have come to you, Thuram," Iron Axe said. The words he said seemed very natural to himself but made Thuram's heart thud. Iron Axe continued, "Your clan is still located in this oasis, am I right? Eight years ago, it was a challenger, just like Osha clan, and should have had a chance to control part of Iron Sand

City but ended up being a watchdog, and later... It became less than a watchdog. Seeing your clansmen reduced to being slaves of other clans, didn't you feel remorseful? Now we offer you a chance to, once again, touch the wall of Iron Sand City if you pledge your loyalty to Lady Drow Silvermoon."

Thuram was stunned for a moment before he burst into laughter.

"Ha ha ha ha ha..."

It was indeed a rare joke since there was nothing more interesting than seeing a mad avenger destroy himself, but Thuram did not expect that this man was trying to divert the joke to him.

"So you want to make this little girl the new chief of a clan before initiating a holy duel? Even her father is not above me, and now you want me to serve her? Perhaps you can find some good helpers who will be able to do some tricks in the duel, but what can I benefit from this? Call my slave clansmen to fight against the watchdogs till they are left with a mass of injuries, and then warmly send you to Iron Sand City?"

Thuram's tone turned a bit hideous on the final words. "Tell me, Iron Axe, what benefits can you offer me so that I won't tell the Iron Whip clan the whereabouts of this Miss Drow Silvermoon in exchange for a generous reward? I guess they'll be very interested in torturing a Divine Lady of their former enemy."

Chapter 745: Furious Thunder

Iron Axe didn't fly into a rage as had been expected, he didn't even have a change in facial expression, which surprised Thuram slightly. Thuram remembered that in the past, this mixed-blood would never allow anyone to threaten the princess of Osha, not even verbally.

He couldn't help but look over at Drow Silvermoon, only to find the Divine Lady had no reaction either. It appeared as if she did not care about her own safety at all.

What were they thinking?

Thuram felt for the God's Stone of Retaliation in his pocket, his fierce expression frozen on his face.

"In fact, I'd never rest our hope on you to defeat the watchdogs. Since you didn't do it eight years ago, I know you don't have the guts... At least you're not as brave as you claim," Iron Axe slowly said, "I'm not returning only for revenge."

His first half of his words stung Thuram to his core, but the second half slightly shocked him.

"Not just for revenge?"

"I'm going to challenge the six clans to make Osha the strongest clan." Iron Axe said word by word.

Although the clans in Iron Sand City managed the oasis together, they were not considered equal. It was universally acknowledged that the strongest would occupy the best area in the city. If another clan desired that area, they had to challenge the clans that ranked above them. For the Osha clan, which had nothing, it meant they had to defeat all six of the clans to take the core area of Iron Sand City.

Only a crazy person would try to do that.

The path of challenges could not be interrupted once it had started, which meant that they had to win six challenges in succession. Each battle would require a ridiculous amount of physical exertion. This will make people desperate, not to mention their opponents would be first-class Mojin warriors. Generally speaking, it takes clan warriors over six months to recover from a holy duel. If a warrior died a new one had to be re-cultivated or recruited.

Basically, the clans with the most resources have the most solid foundations. Wildflame, the First Clan, had occupied the position for decades.

Avengers varied greatly, so it was hard to classify them.

Some of them hit their mark on the first shot, while others lost everything. It was not unusual to see some of them hesitate or even give up during preparation. So they might be half-dead, the moribund, or dead... Undoubtedly, only a crazy man would belong

to the last type.

That left nothing to talk about.

Thuram found that he no longer enjoyed listening to them. They were biting off more than they could chew by attempting to avenge the Ironwhip Clan. Not to mention they were even claiming they would challenge the whole Iron Sand City? Just thinking of it made him anxious. He had no intention of being implicated in the trouble, so he directly shouted, "Boys, catch this guy as well as that woman!"

There were four clansmen standing in the room and two standing outside the door, all of them were holding sharp blades and God's Stones. They already had an advantage in numbers; in addition, Iron Axe and the Divine Lady's weapons had been confiscated before they entered the room. No matter how strong Iron Axe was, it would be impossible for them to escape.

"I should be greatly rewarded for killing the mixed-blood and for giving the descendant of Osha to the Iron Whip clan," he thought. "Maybe I can regain my position as the watchdog for this small oasis."

Just then, the princess of Osha stood up and sneered, while she took off her hood, removing the thin veil that covered her face.

Her dark hair cascaded down her shoulders as her beautiful face was revealed. She was indeed a Divine Lady, but... she was not Drow Silvermoon who Thuram was familiar with.

None of the Sand women would have a snow-white complexion like her.

Her long dark hair spilled down her back like a waterfall and her golden pupils shone with dangerous light.

"Who... are..."

Thuram hadn't even finished his words, while the woman easily dodged a strike from a clansman in front of her and then punched another clansman in his face.

The dark-haired Divine Lady didn't need to use a weapon, her fists were actually more powerful than iron hammers. With a muffled thump, the clansman directly in front of her had been knocked into the air and smashed through the wooden wall, falling from the second floor!

"...you?"

As he finished his query, a second clansman had been hit and also thrown through the wall.

The tavern immediately fell into chaos.

A chilly gust of wind blew in, swaying the flames in the fireplace.

The Divine Lady didn't stop fighting, instead, she moved as if dancing with the wind. Her shadow was amplified by the firelight and it horrified Thuram. "Why? Didn't my clansmen all wear God's Stone of Retaliation?"

He had bought the God's stones from Graycastle with lots of gold royals. Common people deserved to have a chance when fighting the Divine Ladies, but why was she not restrained by the magic stone at all?

The fourth clansman fell to the ground, spitting blood. He had been kicked in the spine by her from behind and almost snapped him in half.

Even a diving Four-winged Eagle couldn't hit more powerfully than that!

No one lasted more than one round. In just a moment, Iron Axe, the Divine Lady, and Thuram were the only ones left standing.

"Damn it, come here quickly, all of you. Someone is causing trouble on the second floor."

"Where's our Head?"

"Why the hell didn't you watch the door?"

"A guest has been smashed to death!"

Rapid footsteps could be heard on the stairs. By the sound of it, many people were coming to the Head's room, unfortunately, the tip of a blade had been placed against Thuram's throat.

"Wait, don't come in, all of you!" He shouted at the door, regardless of the piercing pain where the blade had nicked his skin. A cold sweat oozed from the pores on his forehead.

"Head?"

"Go downstairs! Now!"

Thuram sadly found that Iron Axe had been right, and his courage was indeed less than what he claimed. In the face of a death threat, his first thought was to compromise rather than fight against it. Perhaps, from the beginning, he was never a moribund who had the hope of rising from the ashes like a phoenix. Instead, he was a half-dead who was trapped by his hesitation.

"Now can we talk about it?" Iron Axe said calmly.

"Even if I promised, nothing would change! The watchdogs here are supported by the Iron Whip and Cut Bone clans. You have made such a mess here. Do you think they won't know it? Iron Sand City will hear the news tomorrow!" Thuram growled, "It's impossible to summon the clansmen within such a short time. Besides, most of them have become slaves to other clans. Even if they're willing to come back, they'll be defeated easily by the warriors cultivated by the larger clans. If you don't want to die

here, you'd better escape from the oasis now!"

"As I said before, I didn't expect you to defeat the watchdogs."

Thuram grit his teeth and thought, "What does he mean? If he really is so powerful, why doesn't he become a challenger directly? Why does he want my support?"

Unless... Unless the force he gathered hadn't been from the Southernmost Region!

When the realization hit, the old Head felt his heart tremble in horror.

Did they launch the holy duel in the name of another clan?

Suddenly, they heard thunder dully break twice outside the window. It was not very loud and seemed to come from a great distance.

Surprisingly, Thuram did not see any lightning streaking across the sky. Common sense would dictate that lightning should precede thunder.

Suddenly, the expression on Iron Axe's face finally changed.

"Listen, thunder is coming."

Chapter 746: A Burning Night

The light from the explosion flashed like a firefly in the night.

Van'er raised his telescope and looked toward the oasis.

The burning torches became the best way to find their targets. The torches became more intensive the closer they were to Iron Sand City. Thousands of flashing flames clearly illuminated the camp of Sand Nation, which was the main target of the artillery battalion.

After a while, the sound of a large explosion came from the depths of the oasis.

"The landing locations seem a bit unorganized," muttered Cat's Claw who was also observing.

"That's the best we could do. You know, it's difficult to set the cannon on the sand so we can only use the first shots as tests." Jop replied while loading the shell into the barrel for the next firing.

"Anyway, try to shoot further. If the shell falls on the head of His Excellency Iron Axe, we'll be done for."

"Rest assured. The tavern is far from the camp. If we hit it by mistake, the shooting manuals written by the sages should be rewritten." Rodney tightened the firing rope and shouted, "Ready!"

"Fire!" Van'er nodded.

The two Longsong Cannons fired again with deafening roars. Flames that escaped from the muzzle briefly lit up the ground in front of them and raised enough dust to hit them on their faces, causing the crowd to shut their eyes.

The small oasis was not really a town. It was merely a fortress formed by the clans outside Iron Sand City. None of the houses were made of brick and stone, and most of them were just tents of leather and cloth except some small buildings and watch towers.

Therefore, the damage from the Longsong Cannons was surprisingly good.

Van'er noticed that no matter where the shell landed, the area would be dark for a second but soon light up again. The explosion knocked over tents and torches, and then the oil of torches mixed with other flammable building material, forming more dazzling flames.

This was the first time the artillery battalion of First Army had to use the method of measuring distances and arranging artillery positions according to the firing table. The result could not be described as ideal, but fortunately, the vulnerable and flammable targets made up for this flaw. After several rounds of shooting, the camp of the Sand Nation had been lit into a large fire, while several bright flames were spreading with the help of the roaring evening wind. It was going to ignite the entire oasis. Though he was not experiencing the power of artillery first hand, Van'er could imagine exactly what sort of predicament the so-called watchdogs

were now in.

Overwhelming and unavoidable, this was the Lord of War praised by His Majesty.

Praise the cannon!

Praise the large-caliber cannon!

He proudly glanced at the Gun Battalion, lying in ambush, and the machine gun squads on both sides and once again felt fortunate that he had made the right choice.

The future of warfare would be dominated by cannons. As for flintlocks... they would only be suitable for supporting the cannons or clearing the battlefield, but nothing more.

...

It was after quite a while before Thuram recovered from the earth-shattering explosions. Until now, his ears had been buzzing, as if he had been slapped in his face.

Was that the thunder that Iron Axe had mentioned?

After deep thunder and sharp howls, a watch tower not far from the tavern was suddenly engulfed by a fireball and the whole tower split into pieces within seconds. At the same time, the roar of the

explosion caused his ears to lose hearing for a moment.

Through the smashed holes in the wall, he saw many tents were ignited by the splashing bonfire and then became even larger bonfires. People screamed and ran out of the fire, rolling, and struggling on the ground in an attempt to quench the flames. Unfortunately, few of them were lucky enough to do that.

Some of the sand people near the watch tower fell down unconscious. They were not fatally injured, but they could never stand up again.

Damn, this was not thunder, but heavenly fire falling into the mortal world!

Only the Heavenly Father could have such a terrible power.

Thuram thought such a violent attack would not last long, but he soon found himself to be wrong.

He heard the sound of thunder every couple of minutes which was then followed by fireballs and explosions. He also noticed that the fireballs were scattered at the very beginning, but soon concentrated on the center of the oasis. That was where the watchdogs lived. Different from the vassal clans, the watchdogs occupied the most fertile land in the oasis.

However, at the moment, it had become a hell.

A fire raged as if the sky was burning.

He looked at Iron Axe differently now.

"By the name of Three Gods... you do not have such strength!" Thuram asked with a husky and trembling voice, "Who did you submit to? Those northerners?"

"A merciful king," Iron Axe replied, "he'll bring order and safety to the Ironsand people of the Mojin Clan."

"This is imposs..." He subconsciously wanted to say "impossible", but when he saw the sea of fire spreading throughout the oasis, the last syllable got caught in his throat and could not be uttered.

"Unfortunately, not all people are willing to accept such a system. The oasis feeds the Sand Nation, but at the same time imprisons their thoughts. Killing and framing came from fighting for survival. How ironic that the oasis, that should support life, is soaked with blood. As for the watchdogs, the large clans keep them in power and make our clansmen suffer in sand and drought. I have to say, that's a stupid and short-sighted thing to do."

"If these words were spoken by the northerners, I would not be surprised, but by you, Iron Axe..." Thuram shook his head painfully. "As a mixed-blood grown up in the desert, how can you be so naive? Did you forget that the oasis is limited and can't support the growing population if we don't fight for the territories? Unless Mojins are able to overpower Graycastle, we can't leave the desert. Cooperation and submission will end up in

death as the northerners will never really trust us. The fall of the Black Bone and Sandstone Clans is the proof of that!"

In order to receive rich territory, these two clans ,which should have the opportunity to live in Iron Sand City, chose to offer their service to Garcia, Queen of Clearwater. What did they get? It was understood that everyone was fed a strange pill and eventually turned into rotten flesh and the Queen's promise became meaningless.

"Can we never gain real trust?" Iron Axe said with a slight sigh, "I used to think so, but the evidence that I have seen tell me that some people are born to break routine."

Suddenly, Thuram heard a burst of galloping outside the tavern, which became more and more frequent. He knew that the counterattack team of the watchdogs was assembling.

They might lose the courage to fight, but their skills and horsemanship were not lost. As long as any enemies emerged near the oasis, they would go for them like bloodthirsty sandworms. When he was about to remind Iron Axe, he was grabbed by his collar and drawn to the window.

Not far away, he saw more burning torches moving toward the desert outside the oasis.

Apparently, these watchdogs picked up the attackers' scent.

However, both Iron Axe and the dark-haired Divine Lady were at ease. It seemed that they did not care about this cavalry team.

"What did I say before? Not everyone is happy to accept the new order... The watchdogs thought they can stop the thunder," the mixed-blood whispered in his ear as if he was pronouncing his fate, "But whether you accept it or not, the new order will come."

Chapter 747: The Sniper

The night was not the perfect hour to fight.

The sun and the moon both became invisible during the Months of Demons. Dismal light spilled across the heaving desert, faintly tracing the curve of sand hills. The area which light failed to penetrate was, in contrast, pitch dark.

Given the poor lighting condition, torches became necessities for either attacking or defending.

When glitters of fires emerged here and there in the oasis' direction, Danny polished his clip, slipped it into the loading port and bolted.

"Attention, enemies are coming."

"I saw them."

He first mimicked Malt's voice and then replied to himself.

In this way, he could pretend that Malt was still fighting beside him as his protector, although Malt was no longer a member of the sniper team.

Shortly after Danny had been released from his detention and sent back to the gun battalion, Brian had come to see him and

brought him a brand new flintlock.

It was exactly the one he was holding right now.

Although the new flintlock did not look any different from the bolt gun used by the sniper team, he knew at once that it was a masterpiece after weighing it in the hand.

Like longswords that bore a similar looking, some of them were casually forged by blacksmiths just for training purposes; some of them, however, were splendid weapons, whose blade could bite into flesh as easily as cutting through cheese.

The metal part of the barrel gleamed, its surface as smooth as a maid's skin. The joints were all polished like a work of art. The gun was perfectly molded without any prickly feelings.

What surprised Danny most was the monocular telescope on the top. The lens was engraved with two straight, crisscrossed fine lines, the intersection of which exactly aligned with the place where a bullet should land.

Danny did not understand why the distant target, which had been blurry and tiny earlier, became clear and visible instantly when he looked through the telescope. This meant that the shooting range of the gun had, in a way, been extended. During the testing shooting session, Danny had further verified his theory. He had noticed that the new flintlock was much more accurate than an ordinary bolt gun. When there was no or little wind, he could successfully hit the humanoid target 500 meters away with a

headshot at an accuracy of 90%.

When he had learned that the weapon had been specially made for him by His Majesty, Danny had almost burst into tears. Despite his misconduct, he was still given high hopes by his Majesty and was even granted the power to freely choose his shooting positions. Danny knew he had nothing to pay back the king for his benevolence but his own life.

When Brian had asked him whether he wanted to select a protector, however, Danny had declined the offer immediately.

He had his own protector already.

It was this gun.

And Malt.

Like his commander had predicted, more firelights emerged and they covered the desert like fallen stars. Before every battle, the superiors would usually disclose the operation intention and operation target to each team in detail so that soldiers would know when they should expect to see the battle end.

For example, the cannon unit would lit bonfires at their rampart and fire every seven minutes or so to entice enemies to start counterattacks, for the purpose of bleeding off strength from the watchdog clan and thereby preparing for the general attack at dawn. The lit battlement would attract enemies' attention,

whereas controlling the firing rate was to avoid a fierce, swift bombard that tended to directly disperse the roving enemies.

Of course, Danny knew the artillery battalion did not have the capability to control their firing rate.

Soldiers from the artillery battalion had no idea how many resources were available for them. They were all arrogant, incompetent fighters who probably could not even transport basic equipment to the desert had the witch named Hummingbird not helped them. Compared with those useless idiots, soldiers from the gun battalion were much more productive. Each soldier in the gun battalion was responsible for carrying both weapons and ammunition.

There were a dozen carriages in total, over half of which carried cannon and machine gun shells. One wooden box was only able to house two howitzers. If they fought in the same way as they did during the exercise, two Longsong cannons would consume all the ammunition they took with them in an hour. If the ammunition was exhausted, they would have nothing to fire.

Although Danny admitted that the exercise was magnificent, he always thought tons of gold royals were burned each time they fired. Unfortunately, too ignorant and conceited to understand that all the expenses incurred were actually borne by His Majesty's treasury, the soldiers from the artillery battalion simply viewed such remarkable power as their own. If one day His Majesty stopped financially supporting them, these soldiers would be absolutely nothing compared with the gun battalion!

Therefore, the real reason for controlling the firing rate was to reserve some ammunition for future emergencies, rather than avoid the dispersion of enemies. They probably had to wait for another one or two weeks before new recruits provided supplies and new ammunition to the oasis.

When the firelight at the very front was lured into the First Army's ambush, Danny raised his telescope.

"Norther...ly wind, relatively strong. Your target is about 700 meters away."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Danny muttered to himself, his hand on the trigger.

Considering the accuracy would be greatly affected at night, he did not position himself too far away from the battlement. Instead, he decided to shoot across the field. In this way, he would not lose sight of his enemies even if they were charging forward on their warhorses.

Sand Nation was indeed barbarians good at fighting on horseback. The dispersed firelights had gradually formed a straight line by the time they charged. The patterings of hooves drummed the ground in a chorus and gradually grew faster. Meanwhile, those warriors tossed the torches and drew out their

swords. As their swords reflected no light, the roaring battlement of the artillery became the most distinctive landmark Danny could see.

Just then, numerous flickers suddenly appeared at the two sandhills flanking in the shadow.

"Tuk, tuk, tuk..."

The sharp, crisp sound of machine guns mixed with the drumming horse hooves officially marked the commencement of the battle. As there was no field artillery, heavy machine guns became the weapons with the longest shooting range. Bullets streamed out and swept over the charging warriors. The desert instantly began to thunder. Danny could hear people shrieking, cursing and yelling. Shadows seemed to move even faster in the darkness.

Danny paid them no mind.

His eyes were fixed on the enemy at the very front.

"500 meters. I got you."

It was not easy to locate his target at a moonless night. He could barely discern the figure of the charging enemy. However, the battle was not an exercise either. He did not have to shoot his head to score. A shot in any parts of the enemy's body would be enough to take him down. This applied to both the mount and the rider.

Danny pulled the trigger. The barrel slightly trembled. He was exhilarated by the smoke of gunpowder.

Danny did not see where the bullet landed, nor did he notice any spilled blood. The enemy simply died with a quiver and fell off the horse.

"This is my hunting ground," thought Danny. "This is where I should stay."

"Did you just see that, Malt?"

"Don't be distracted. Your next target is coming."

"Ah, place the matter in my hand."

Chapter 748: A New Osha Clan

As dusk deepened and the darkness seeped through clouds, both parties found it difficult to continue with the battle.

Evidently, once the landing spots of bullets and their targets were indiscernible, the shooting accuracy of the machine gun squad would drop drastically. Although the number of machine guns invested in this operation was not comparable to that in Coldwind Ridge, they could still stop the cavalrymen from charging quite well. When their enemies tossed the torches, there would always be a few dozen people making their way through the barrage fire, howling while dashing toward the artillery and thereby becoming Danny's shooting targets.

On the other hand, the enemies could not tell where their real threats lay. They neither saw their companions shatter under fire nor did they know what weapon exactly stood between the two sand hills on either side.

Without a torch, the cavalrymen behind did not quite know what had truly happened to their companions at the front. They could only hear the roar of cannons not far away and see the flickering lights on the sides. To them, the thundering cannons were apparently more threatening than unmanned sand hills on the sides.

Because of this, the watchdog was not crushed at once but they continuously charged forward like endless foaming tides.

For those seasoned clan warriors, they believed constant slashing and charging was the best way to dismantle enemies' wills and lower their morale. Speed represented power. No slave or mercenary could ever defy their ceaseless attack. They believed once the defensive line, no matter how impregnable it was, was broken through by cavalry, their enemies would soon fall into chaos.

This created a perfect opportunity for Danny to prey.

It was not long before he shot the 20th enemy down.

Meanwhile, Danny also noticed a strange phenomenon: many times he took aim at an enemy at the very front, only to find that his prey had been taken by someone else.

As if someone were competing with him.

It was more than that, however.

What thrilled Danny was that this sniper hiding in the darkness appeared to be an exquisite hunter.

Because all his enemies fell to the same side.

If his competitor was facing enemies like him, the target would fall backward when being shot in the torso. If he hit the mount, then the enemy would be thrown off the horse and fell forward. Danny did not really know the mechanism behind this, but his

prediction was mostly accurate.

The fact that the target fell to one side meant that the shooter was close to one of the sand hills and always shot his enemy in the torso rather than his mount.

What does that imply?

It indicated that the hunter could not only capture the darting horserider in the dismal light but could also predict where his target was heading before each firing. As the crisp winds in the desert were always variable and unforeseeable, the fact that the hunter could still maintain such an astonishing accuracy really showed that his shooting was a masterstroke.

Is there really such an excellent sniper in the army?

Is he a member of the precision shooting squad, or a person like him, a soldier from the gun battalion who was picked out by His Majesty and given a new bolt gun?

Danny could barely suppress his excitement. He sped up what he was doing.

He did not want to lose to his rival.

Especially when Malt was looking up to him.

"Only one left on your right hand, 250 meters away from the defensive line."

"He's mine now."

...

The roar of thunders finally died down in the second half of the night, but Thuram did not hear the cheers of returning warriors which he had been anticipating.

Although the watchdog was caught unprepared, based on the number of torches, there were nearly 2,000 summoned warriors who participated in the battle. No matter they had lost or won, he should have heard something back from them by now. Nevertheless, after thundering yells and shouts gradually faded away, the night fell deadly silent, as though the 2,000 people had all been engulfed by a giant monster, both flesh and bones.

Thuram sent all the clansmen who came to rescue to put out the blazes as Iron Axe had instructed. The fires in the oasis were thus gradually quenched.

He was not sure whether he should rejoice or lament.

Watchdogs had never ceased their oppression of his clansmen. Thuram had always dreamed that they would, one day, meet some misfortunes, for example, enraging the big clan in the city or being miserably defeated by some challenger who rose abruptly. He

would take delight in any woes that rested upon them.

But he had not expected that this new challenger was Iron Axe.

It seemed that Iron Axe also planned to involve him in this tumult of battle that aimed to select the strongest clan.

Perchance he should persuade Iron Axe to first hold the bloodstained place before considering to take the next step. It was true that the golden-eyed Divine Lady coming with him was powerful, but... the one from Raging Flare clan was not so easy to deal with as well. As Raging Flare clan was the biggest clan among all, they could decide how the duel should take place. If they chose to have a one-on-one hand-to-hand combat, Thuram did not think the Iron Axes' Divine Lady would win.

A holy duel was said to be the most open and fairest competition, it was actually, however, more a competition between the two clans. Each of the clan could not only set up traps for the other prior to the duel, but they could also frame their rivals in the ring as well. Skillful warriors was definitely not a guarantee of an eventual victory. For that, the exile of Osha clan had provided the best example.

What bewildered him the most, nonetheless, was why the King of Graycastle had a sudden interest in the desert.

To northerners, the desert always represented barbarism and primitiveness. Northerners forbade Sand Nation to set foot in their kingdoms. They did not want to meddle in disputes among clans

either. Only tradesmen traveled back and forth between the desert and kingdoms, and they usually traded slaves only.

Plus, what did Iron Axe mean by "order and oasis"? It was rumored that only Three Gods Emissary could cultivate an oasis in the desert and stop storms. Another saying was that the Southernmost Region had originally been a verdant land covered with green grass and trees, interspersed with singing brooks. It was the death of the emissary that made the land patched and wasted like the one today. When Three Gods dispatched their new emissary, the Southernmost Region would once again become prosperous. However, it was simply a legend shrouded in mystery. Nobody had ever made this happen; otherwise, Sand Nation would not fight for water and food all the year round.

While he was waiting in anxiety, dawn finally broke in the east with a dagger of daylight streaking the sky.

Then Thuram heard a distant, strange roar of horns. The sound was not as dull and low as the blare of an ox horn, but it was sharper and crisper like a repetitive ticking...

Shortly afterward, a peculiar army emerged at the border of the oasis.

The soldiers lined up horizontally and approached the bloodstained place with an irresistible force. They then started a bitter battle with the watchdog. It might not be that fierce though, for a group of clan warriors, who dashed forward with swords, all fell to the ground after a series of "crack, crack" of gunshots. The rest of the warriors dispersed immediately, paying their moaning

companions no mind. After the soldiers entered the oasis, they quickly occupied the several watchtowers and encircled the tavern.

When that blue-gray haired, dark-skinned lady came into the room, Thuram knew he had no other choices. Although he had not seen her for seven or eight years, he could still perceive some resemblances between her and her mother.

Thuram went to his knee in front of Drow Silvermoon, his forehead touching the cold floor. He said in a raucous voice, "I swear to Three Gods that my clansmen and I will be at your service. From now on, you'll be the chief of the new Osha clan."

Chapter 749: Osha's Present

The moment Rubaka Bloodwhip got out of the bed, he heard the news about the change in the ownership of the small oasis in the northwest.

"Really?" His brows furrowed. Although he had also seen glimmers of fires in the oasis, he had not expected Howling clan would be obliterated over one night. He tried to think of a newly established clan that possessed such impressive power but could not name any.

Rubaka patted his concubine lying next to him to usher her out. After the woman wrapped herself up in a blanket and withdrew, he turned to his men and said, "Fill me in."

"Yes, Mr. Chief. According to the people who fled from the oasis, it appeared the fire wasn't caused by the challenger lurking there but was actually a fire from heaven induced by the Father God..."

"Nonsense!" Rubaka coughed out a spittle. "Those cravens just blame everything on Three Gods when they come across trouble. I'm going to hang all of them above the gate of Iron Sand City!"

The clansman replied hesitatively, "but... I sent someone to the camps at the small oasis this morning. What they found seemed to be consistent with the description... There're many holes as black as pitch in the ground. Corpses and fragments of building materials are everywhere. It doesn't look like a simple arson."

"Fragments?"

"Yes. Men were torn to pieces as if a huge sandworm or burrow scorpion had plodded on the campground." The clansman was careful to choose his words. "Most people who stayed in the camp died miserably, while those who went to seek pleasure outside fought back. Yet they were vanquished even before they saw their rivals."

"In other words, those fools were ambushed and all ran for life without even approaching their enemies? So what now? Haven't they even figured out which clan took the small oasis?" Rubaka started to suspect whether he had been too generous to the watchdog. He had made a great effort in persuading them to work for him, but their performance was indeed disappointing. Could it be possible that they had lived too comfortably for so long that meat and mead had made them more drunken and lecherous than he desired them to be?

"My men are investigating and we should soon receive some information from them." The clansman hesitated for a moment and then said, "I heard some refugees say that they've seen many northerners."

"Northerners..."

Hearing this, Rubaka began to take this matter seriously.

He walked to the window, naked, and looked in the northwestern direction. The fires had been extinguished long before. He could

only see tendrils of dark smoke rise into the air at a distance.

Although Howling clan was drawn over to his side and served as his watchdog through the joint effort of both Ironwhip and Bonegrinding clans, he did not care much about their survival. After Rubaka settled down in Iron Sand City, he came to understand that the challenger system was actually more a safeguard established by the six clans than a qualification test.

A holy duel was simply a small fight, whereas battles provoked by challengers for the ownership of the small oasis could be considered as a full-fledged war. It was common for two small clans to drown each other in blood, for the oasis was a fat piece of meat that every clan who wished to strengthen their power drooled for, even if they did not plan to set foot in Iron Sand City. No matter which party eventually won, the victory usually cost dear and both parties would need a considerably long time to recover.

During the time when challengers were recuperating, big clans could easily convince those small clans to work for them as watchdogs through either bribing or duress. It was particularly easy to persuade those who believed that the compromising was just temporary and that they would sooner or later challenge the big clan to another duel. Practically, in the end, none of them managed to toll the holy bell of Iron Sand City.

Because by that time, new challengers would emerge and struck out the old watchdog.

In this way, big clans were able to remain in a relatively secure

position without being consumed by the war.

Now, since Ironwhip had risen to the fourth place on the ranking, it was unlikely that challengers would seek him as their rival even if they planned to start an immediate duel. That was why the change of the ownership of the small oasis had not really alarmed him.

But the appearance of northerners had changed the whole story.

Queen of Clearwater, for instance, had created quite a big commotion in Iron Sand City. In fact, many people yearned for the evergreen land in the north and were even willing to reduce to slaves or sellswords to live there. The departure of two potential challengers had once left the small oasis unmanned and thus attracted many people who wanted to rule this land to start Divine Challenges. It was the chaos created by this temporary disorder that made Rubaka's clan the fourth biggest one.

What game are they playing this time?

"Keep an eye on those people and let me know what's exactly happened." Rubaka turned around and instructed his clansman. "Which city are those northerners from? How many of them? What weapon do they carry? What do they want? I want to know all of these!"

"Yes, Mr. Chief!"

Perhaps it was time for him to discuss the matter with the other big clans.

The rule in the Southernmost Region was that no outsiders should meddle in their affairs!

...

Nonetheless, Rubaka Bloodwhip received a piece of incredible news in the afternoon.

"What did you say? Osha clan?"

"That's what they say. The banners in the oasis have all been replaced with ones with the sigil of Osha clan. I also saw Princess Osha who was traded as a slave. She's now a Divine Lady and is calling on her clansmen. There're a lot of people responding to her call!"

How... can this be possible?

Rubaka was not ignorant of the kingdoms in the north. A Divine Lady was viewed as a representation of evil in Graycastle. Their social status was even lower than that of a slave girl in Sand Nation, not to mention a Divine Lady slave. He wondered how she won the support from northerners and returned to the Southernmost Region to exact her revenge along with her northern followers?

Rubaka smelled sheer folly but was also a little rattled by the news.

Mojins had been forced to confine their activities to the desert up until now not because they preferred the desert as their dwellings, but because they did not have the capability to confront Graycastle. If Osha clan supported by northerners planned to wage a war against Iron Sand City, all the clans would come together to fight back. If they, however, only intended to weed him out, would the other clans help Ironwhip?

The answer was there.

Damn!

Rubaka smashed the wine glass to the ground and stomped on it. It instantly broke to pieces.

"If you want to avenge your father's death through a holy duel, then I'm right here waiting for you!" Rubaka said within himself insolently. "Northerners may have finer weapons and they might outnumber us, but when it comes to a duel, Ironsand people of the Mojin Clan are the most valiant warriors! I'll let you know the taste of despair!"

Just at that moment, another clansman entered the hall. "Mr. Chief, Osha clan has sent a present to us."

"What?" Rubaka felt his temples throbbing. "A present?"

"Yes. It's right in the yard."

"Take me there." He ground his teeth.

...

It was a huge wooden box, as tall as a grown person, its width half of its height. The box, which was assembled by a few ordinary planks, with an iron nail staked at each corner, looked nothing unusual from the outside.

"Where's the courier?" Rubaka asked.

"Already gone."

"How many of them?"

"Well... only one."

"Only one?" He raised his brows and kicked the box. The box rolled over on the ground, producing loud clanks and clinks. Obviously, there was something in it. Yet based on the weight of the box, the stuff seemed to be pretty light as though the box were hollow.

Rubaka wondered if there were torn limbs and flesh, or human skins in it. Apart from a bluff, he could not think of anything else.

Rubaka commanded coolly, "Take it to Stone Castle. Let's see what game they're playing."

Chapter 750: An Unexpected Thunder

After his men opened the wooden box, he saw the "present" in it.

It was a coffin.

A finely crafted coffin.

The coffin was hemmed with luxurious gold foil, decorated with beautiful lacquer paintings. The pattern on the coffin's lid was a black short whip, which was exactly Iron Whip clan's sigil.

Rubaka Bloodwhip stiffened before breaking into a half-sneering smile

"That's it? I thought they would give me something scarier than this." He shook his head. "I was expecting a head, ears or a man's skins... which is how Iron Sand City normally handles this kind of matter. A coffin? The Southernmost Region doesn't need such a frivolous thing!"

The dead here would all be dumped in the desert, buried in scorching sands and eventually reduce to skeletons. No matter how prominent and distinguished he once had been, death made them all equal.

Only people from the north needed those awkward wooden cases.

They seemed to like locking themselves up in this cage of eternity after their deaths.

"The whore of Osha thought this would frighten me?" Rubaka breathed heavily. "Perchance she's forgotten how a Sand Nation usually makes threats after being a slave in Graycastle for so long."

Nonetheless, the humiliation made Rubaka's blood all rush to his head.

"Get me the ax!" he yelled.

Soon a clansman entered with a huge cast-iron ax on his shoulder. The hilt of the ax was nearly of a man's height, its glinty black blade as big as a man's skull. Although Rubaka was the chief of Iron Whip clan, his favorite weapon was this giant, heavy battle ax. It worked perfectly for slaughtering desert beasts and beheading his challengers.

Nothing could possibly compete with the absolute power of this ax. Once being hit, the person would die instantly at a single blow even if he was wearing an armor which northerners typically wore.

The ax had also tasted the blood of Osha clan, including women's and children's.

Rubaka had forgotten to tell Drow Silvermoon that those exiles did not make their trip to Endless Cape because he had taken a

detour aforetime and arrived there ahead of them. They had all been slashed in the desert.

He did not fear retribution but simply enjoyed killing.

A coffin?

Get lost.

Rubaka coughed out a spittle and howled. He held up the battle ax, aimed at the coffin lid patterned with the iron whip and then gave it a full swing...

"Crack!"

A number of sparks flew off the blade as if it had hit something hard like iron or stones.

The coffin did not split in half as he had anticipated. From the vibration of the hilt, Rubaka knew the pretty wooden case was actually stuffed with items rather than being empty!

But it was too late.

Following the sparks, a streak of dazzling light came out of the coffin and soon lit up the entire hall. The lit area expanded immediately as the light spread and flared out.

Rubaka, however, did not see any of these.

When the light flitted across him, his eyes and tongue were torn to bits by the strength of rapidly expanded airwaves. Subsequently, his head, limbs and inner organs were all torn apart...

All the residents in Iron Sand City witnessed an incredible scene when they heard a ground-shaking bang.

Flames and smoke escaped from the bottom of the stonewatch of Rising Sun like raging underground fire; the garden wall was practically wiped out by a giant visible hand. The whole stone castle sprang up abruptly before it collapsed in the heavy smoke.

First, the wall sank, followed by the pillars and the roof. As more stones fell off, more smoke erupted from the ground. In the end, a column of smoke rose out of the crumpled stone castle, soared into the clouds, and then finally blended with the overcast sky.

"A Tower of Babel" seemed to be suddenly erected in Iron Sand City

...

Thuram in Oasis Tavern also witnessed the explosion. He did not understand what the story Iron Axe had told him earlier exactly referred to until a moment ago.

The coffin filled with snow powder, the weight reduced by the

Divine Lady, the flint closely attached to the lid and the lanyard connected to the ceiling... All of these would trigger a roar of thunders no matter how the coffin was opened. Whether by force or through a regular procedure, the explosion was inevitable. Although he had no knowledge of snow powder or lanyards, he understood what a thunderbolt was.

Thuram could imagine how frightful this unexpected thunder was, for the blast, although distant, could be heard somewhere several miles away, and the column of smoke could be even detected at the bloodstained place.

If the coffin was truly the cause of such a horrific scene in Iron Sand City, it was very likely that the chief of Iron Whip clan had already died.

The only thing that Thuram had failed to predict was that Iron Axe actually took action on Iron Whip clan, the fourth strongest clan, prior to the duel, not to mention the vengeance was inflicted in such a blatant way.

"You..." He stared at Iron Axe, who remained unperturbed, in astonishment, failing to articulate his sentence.

Iron Axe explained nonchalantly, "Rubaka Bloodwhip profaned the holy duel back then. He also failed Three Gods' expectation. How can I have a fair fight with a guy who has been disqualified at the Land of Fire? Rubaka and his clan are all cowards. I've never treated them as my rivals since the beginning."

"But... Ironwhip is essentially a big clan..."

Iron Axe shook his head. "That's exactly why I let them die in this way rather than allow them to die with honor in a ring. Plus, Osha clan won't violate 'Three Gods' rules. Once our rivals yield, we'll lay down our weapons and exempt them from death." He paused for a second and then said, "Think about it. Were you the chief of Ironwhip, what would you do when you're informed that Osha clan has come back?"

Thuram instantly understood what Iron Axe meant.

It was true that a person who had once broken the rule was very likely to commit wrongdoings again. A person who disobeyed 'Three Gods' rules would cause incessant trouble. Even if he attempted to reverse his defeat eight years ago through a holy duel, he would probably keep harassing and framing his rivals before and after the fight. It would be better to completely destroy him than constantly having your eyes peeled.

"But... if Rubaka didn't open the coffin or destroy it, your plan would have failed." Thuram blurted out his last question.

"The chief of Ironwhip were in nature aggressive and savage. He liked to destroy and slaughter. It's as easy to read his mind as to read a monkey's." Iron Axes curled up his lips into a smile. "Plus, the coffin full of snow powder was just the very beginning of my plan, an appetizer, so to speak. Even if Rubaka luckily survived, there was much more awaiting him... Now it seems that 'Three Gods' won't protect a traitor."

Thuram shuddered at these words.

He had sworn to Three Gods when he had pledged fealty to Drow Silvermoon and the new Osha clan.

Iron Axe's last sentence was also a warning to him.

"Now we can crack into the business." The mixed-blood patted Thuram on his shoulder, utterly unabashed. "The reason I've picked you is that you know everything about Iron Sand City. People in the oasis told me that there's nothing about the desert that you don't know."

"It's simply because I've been living here for a long time and heard a lot of stories." After witnessing how the watchdog had been defeated overnight and how the explosion had brought upon Iron Whip clan a swift destruction, Thuram showed more respect to Iron Axe, Princess Osha and Graycastle that supported them. "I'll tell you everything that I know in detail."

Iron Axe inclined his head. "Very good. If you want to win the holy duel, you have to first thoroughly investigate your rivals... Let's begin with warriors from various clans and their Divine Ladies."

Chapter 751: [Devourer] Fran

...

"Currently, the plan for taking the Southernmost Region is going smoothly. The Iron Whip clan has fallen. Echo entrusted me to send her gratitude to you."

"It takes some time to prepare for a holy duel, and I expect that the clans in the Iron Sand City will head for the Land of Fire in a week."

"During the interim, I've hired some clansmen to mark the location of the underground Styx River. I believe we'll soon find a Blackwater River relatively close to the coast."

"In addition, Your Majesty, how are you going to deal with the Divine Lady of the clan?"

"With my great respect, Iron Axe."

"Your Majesty, this is the message we received from the Southernmost Region."

The Sigil of Listening flashed slightly, emitting a red light. Countess Spear paused after reporting, apparently waiting for Roland's reply.

Then Nightingale handed another Sigil over to Roland.

She placed the Sigil next to her slim legs on the table where she was seated and Roland couldn't tell whether she did it on purpose or not. Even though it was not summer, she was still wearing a pair of skinny pants that accentuated her perfect figure. Roland would have to get close to her legs if he wanted to talk into the Sigil.

For Roland, this was a dilemma.

He did not know whether to gaze directly at her legs or glance at them casually.

"Ahem, well done... I mean, Iron Axe."

"Your Majesty, are you all right?" the Countess inquired. "Your voice is husky. Please, keep warm this winter. You aren't as strong as the witches."

"I'm fine," Roland said as he cleared his throat. "Tell Iron Axe to go forward with the plan if the situation is close to what we expected. As for the Divine Lady, he can endeavor to persuade her to come to Neverwinter. But, if she's unwilling to leave the Southernmost Region, there's no need to push her."

"Is that all?"

"Yeah. I'll let you know if I have other requirements."

"I see, then I'll take my leave, Your Majesty."

The red light from the Sigil went out.

Roland raised his head and exhaled gently.

Why was he feeling like he had lost something?

Nightingale smiled as she put away the Sigil before slipping off the table and returning to the lounge chair where she could continue to read the picture-story book, "The Witches' Story," while she chewed on dried fish.

Roland curled his upper lip and started to concentrate on the real business at hand. They had applied all of the Sigils of Listening in the Desert Mission. The Countess Spear Passi of Fallen Dragon Ridge is transferring the messages to enable them to reach an instant contact between Neverwinter and the advance troops—although calling was still somewhat inconvenient, it was much faster than the traditional way of delivering a message that would cost them a dozen days as well as a carrier pigeon which, though having saved them a lot of time, still took several days.

He finally felt he would be able to get an overview of the situation without going out of his territory.

Unfortunately, a Sigil of Listening would only work if a witch provided the power. Which meant, at least two Sigils and two

witches are necessary for a conversation to transpire, meaning that it would never replace the current communication tools used by common people.

Currently, the laying of the first telephone line in the Western Region was underway. It would directly connect the castle office to the City Hall of the Longsong Area. Meanwhile, the second and third lines were also being planned, which, as expected, would connect the City Halls in both areas so that any commands could be passed with just one call in the future.

Erecting electrical poles was time-consuming and labor-intensive, and furthermore, even the finished poles were vulnerable to the snow and ice. Considering this, Roland decided to do it in a convenient and safe way by setting the cable along the mountains and burying them in the ground by Lotus.

Once the mountain defenses have been established, inevitably the lines would need to increase in order to connect with his office. However, by that time there would be a 10 hand-operated system in place.

Aside from that, Roland was also concerned about the relocation of the ancient Taquila witches.

Maggie and Lightning had taken on the role of patrol. They increased their scope of investigation to 30 miles north of the mountains. This way they could signal an early warning in the case of a large-scale demonic beast attack.

After all, the relic of deities that were liable to determine the life and death of the Taquila group deserved to be handled with care.

He had talked with Pasha many times over the past two weeks.

Their idea was very simple. They decided to let the worm carrier open up a mountain channel leading to the Western Region first, and then choose a place where the rock formation was stable and had fewer forked roads and there they would build a palace. After that, the ancient witches would gradually move carriers, materials, and shells for the God's Punishment Army to their new dwelling before transporting the Instrument of Divine Retribution and the relic of gods.

So far Fran had the best experience relocating, or perhaps Roland should call her... a devouring worm.

Roland was unexpectedly shocked when he saw her squirm her chubby body so she could squeeze before the phantom instrument to express her gratitude to him, mouth gaping.

Later, he learned from Pasha that witches who integrated into carriers would no longer be able to be stored in God's Punishment Warriors. Both, their perceptions and consciousnesses, were consolidated within the new bodies. The advantage was that the carriers could be used in a rush, but once their current bodies were damaged, they wouldn't have any other alternative carriers.

Indeed, if the witches did not use this method of bonding, they would not be able to manipulate the body even with a lifetime of

practice—how would a person, accustomed to using fingers and limbs, learn to manipulate countless tentacles or a body that had to inch along like a worm? On the contrary, once they had adapted to their peculiar carriers, it was unlikely for them to return to their previous way of life.

When Fran was not in use, ancient witches had to put her soul back to the soul container where she would fall asleep forever, for the devouring worm must consume a large amount of food to keep alive. Certainly, it was not a good experience for Fran at all. In a sense, she sacrificed her future for the continuation of the Taquila group, and she had paid a higher price than Pasha and Alethea who had transformed into the original carriers.

At least the latter could always watch the world and feel the changes happening in the outside world.

So, her gratitude to Roland was palpable.

Another key point that made her feel so grateful was that Roland boasted that there would be ongoing work in Neverwinter waiting for Fran. That meant he would be offering her enough food to keep her energetic. Fortunately, the worm was omnivorous and could accept both cereal and meat.

"I want to eat hot and seasoned meat porridge, as well as a whole veal with its skin roasted to be greasy!"

As Fran said that, her mouth began to water.

Although the worm's appearance was a bit ugly, they, like the blob, could sense their external environment in a unique way, which included taste, pain, and temperature.

Roland accepted her gratitude in his heart with both laughter and tears.

It seemed that no matter the world, the construction industry would always be a huge behemoth that devoured gold.

Incidentally, he also asked Pasha what the original and central carrier ate to sustain life. Her answer was mud and high temperatures—which was why they liked to stay in magma.

The answer relieved Roland slightly, This meant he wouldn't have to be responsible for supplying food to those who were nearly immortal. Presumably, the blob was more like a plant in the way it gathered energy when compared to the devouring worms.

Just as he considered how to plan the mountain defense so the underground military facilities would have an effective connection with the current byroads or even the palace of the ancient witches, there was suddenly the sound of an explosion coming from outside the window.

Roland turned and looked out the French window in surprise. He saw black smoke, mixed with some looming flames, rising from the corner of town, where the school would be located.

"Nightingale!"

"I'll make Sylvie and Phyllis go and take a look. Your Majesty, please don't leave the office. I'll be right back!" As Nightingale said this, she entered her Mist and disappeared completely.

Chapter 752: Detective Group, Another Strike!

"Lily, Lily, have you heard?" Mystery Moon rushed into the bedroom and leaned over to put her face close to Lily's. "Something happened in the school district!"

"Stand away. You're blocking my light." Lily pushed Mystery Moon's face away and continued to adjust the focal length of her microscope, but she sighed inwardly, thinking that her duplicate test today was going to be chucked out again.

"It's said that there was an explosion as well as a big fire. Who do you think was responsible for that? The church or the demons?"

"The church has been defeated by His Majesty, and the demons are thousands of kilometers away from us!" Lily glanced up at her impatiently. "I suppose it was some idiots who stole the waste of the chemical lab and brought it into the classroom."

Similar things happened before. Such as the accident two weeks ago, when a researcher had brought the failed gun cotton back to his home and wanted to use it as a kindling for his stove. As a result, it was ignited by his child accidentally and nearly burned the house to the ground. Hearing about this accident, His Majesty blew up, scolding the person responsible in a voice so loud that it echoed throughout the whole castle.

After that, the regulations in the chemical lab were strengthened a lot. Lily had seen the new rules from Scroll. It turned from a thin

piece of parchment into a book that was as thick as adult's forefinger.

"But this time there's an explosion. How can you be so indifferent to what happens in Neverwinter? This is our home!" Mystery Moon said eloquently.

"Stop bluffing. You are just too curious to wait for the answer!"

Lily was a little angry. "That's why we should leave it to some more professional people. By the way, what I'm doing is also for the development of Neverwinter!" She paused. "Yet, all you've been doing is interfering with my experiment and idling about all the time!"

"Oh?" Mystery Moon revealed a strange smile. "Then what have you achieved so far?"

"Er..." Lily suddenly felt short of breath.

"None, right? You've been staring at that microscope for more than a year and yet you've done nothing helpful for His Majesty, while my electromagnetic power has brought light to His Majesty so that the people could even continue their work at night," Mystery Moon said, having her nose high in the air. "Oh... but I, as always, don't dislike you, my old friend. To find out the truth of the problem, is also to do His Majesty a favor."

"Please dislike me," Lily replied spitefully.

She still did not know why she still was still failing to transform the parent population into some specific types of tiny worms. She had already managed to control the shape of parent worms and make them as accurate as possible to the goal worm she wanted the parent worm to assimilate, but she still failed.

The young girl faintly felt there must be something missing between them, but she could not find any particular clues. So, other than healing some cold plagues, she had spent most of her time at the microscope after her ability had evolved. The fact that she could neither promote productivity in Neverwinter like Anna and Soraya nor bring joy to everyone like Evelyn still rankled in her mind.

Lily did enjoy observing the complex world that could not be seen with naked eyes, but... she also did not want to be a freeloader and contribute nothing to His Majesty, though she would never admit it verbally.

Thinking that even the fool, Mystery Moon had surpassed her in achievements, she felt so unpleasant that her heart wrenched.

"No, I won't. I'm sorry... Just take it as keeping my company, Okay?" Seeing that pushing Lily did not work out, Mystery Moon immediately changed her strategy. She recovered her beseeching face and held one of Lily's arms, crying. "It's not harmful to go out and take a walk. You'll be suffocated staying indoors all day!"

Lily found it was hard to turn her down when Mystery Moon

acted like that.

She impatiently drew her arm out of Mystery Moon's holding and looked at her, sighing. "I know, but don't make trouble for His Majesty and Sister Nightingale."

"I promise!"

How did she not notice that Mystery Moon would become so clingy after they got familiar with each other?

If she had known it earlier, she would insist on being paired up as roommates with Leaf or Scroll.

"So... are we going there now?" Lily asked.

"Hang on for a while. Some sisters also want to find out the truth. I'll go and get all of them." As Mystery Moon said, she rushed out of the room, and after 15 minutes or so, she came back with several witches. "Now everyone's here. Let's go!" Mystery Moon announced.

Lily gaped at the five witches behind Mystery Moon. "You're going to take so many people there?"

"We also want to be of some help!" Amy raised her hand and replied. She, who bonded fast with others, looked even more sprightly than Mystery Moon.

"If His Majesty permits..." Margie, who was a little timid, expressed her idea.

"And, I..." Vanilla tried to say something. "No need to be curious about why she is here, for she must be forced by Mystery Moon," Lily said in her heart.

"The thing Mystery Moon said is very interesting. I'll go with you." Evelyn gave her reason. "Oh, God, even Evelyn is here... Doesn't she have to make wine today?" Lily could not help thinking.

"I suppose I'll just do it in the same way as last time, when we read the test papers in secret. I won't do my power with someone else staring at me." Summer said at last. She looked rather nervous, but more itching than last time.

"Doomed, these guys are all enchanted by Mystery Moon. But she came to you guys for nothing more than more shoulders to carry the responsibility in case of being blamed by His Majesty."

But Lily felt relieved to see Summer here, for she knew that if Nightingale or the Ministry of Justice did not take Summer with them to the scene, it meant that the accident in the school was not grave, which, as she had surmised, was witnessed by many people and did not cause any dire consequences.

At last, Lily decided to leave it at that and accompany them to hang around.

...

Margie summoned the Magic Ark to carry the party to the school district. Through the ark roof, Lily could clearly see things on the ground, which was a fantastic experience for her. Traveling under the ground gave her a feeling of swimming in the seawater, as if when she looked up, she could see the pure blue, rippling sea surface.

A police cordon had been pulled up around the school and black-uniformed policemen were guarding each crossing. But this symbolic closure meant nothing compared to the Magic Ark, the party passed through the street and the walls and they entered the school.

It was originally a mansion belonging to an aristocrat of Stronghold. After being further expanded by His Majesty, it became the elementary institution of Neverwinter today. However, rather than the houses in the residential district that were made of red brick and cement, most of the rooms here were still made of wood. At this moment, the flame had long been extinguished. Judging from the burned outer wall, they located the place that caught fire on the second floor of the main teaching building, where some wallcoverings had fallen off and the ground was scattered with a pile of glass debris that was probably caused by the explosion.

The party waited for a moment under the ground, making sure that no one walked in the school and that the whole building was empty before letting Margie control the Magic Ark to surface from

the ground near the school building.

Chapter 753: The Truth Reappears

They sneaked into the building and quietly made their way up to the second floor.

The smell of burnt wood was still present in the corridor where books and pieces of paper were scattered around the floor, presumably left behind by the students who left in a panic.

The group of witches followed the smell and soon found the site of the accident: a classroom located at the end of the corridor.

After entering the room, Lily noticed that a corner of the room had been charred black and the entire wall had cracked open. The cracks even reached the floor. However, the fire did not seem to have spread very far. Lily could easily see the marks on the ground that were caused by the changes in the intensity of the flames. The pitch black wood near the source of the fire and the obviously less burnt wood at the outer rims formed a ripple-like pattern on the ground. She knew that this was not a fire that started naturally.

But what Lily was worried about the most were the cracks that snaked down the wall.

They looked almost as if they were the result of ax swings, and the openings seem entirely carbonized. Lily could even feel a faint residual warmth when she touched it with her fingers.

"This must be the place." Mystery Moon walked around the corner and said, "Summer, we'll leave the rest to you."

"Okay... But please stop me if someone were to come," Summer walked into the center of the room and summoned her magic power.

Thanks to them knowing the exact time of the explosion and the fact that only less than a day had passed since the accident, Summer soon found the time right before the accident. As her magic power gushed out, the damaged walls recovered, and order was restored back to the messy room. Many students appeared in the room, some were taking a nap on their desks while some were happily chatting together. There was no teacher on the teaching podium, meaning that this was probably during a lunch break.

Margie and Vanilla, who saw this sight for the first time ever, gasped and could not help exclaiming, but they quickly covered their mouth as were of disturbing Summer. They became quite flustered and almost tripped over as they tried to step back to dodge a "student" who walked over and passed through them like a ghost.

"Don't worry. These are just illusions," Evelyn explained enthusiastically. "Summer can create flashbacks of scenes that have already happened."

"What... a great ability!" Amy praised with admiration. She wasn't scared at all even though it was also her first time experiencing Summer's flashback creating ability.

"Haha... it's actually no big deal." Summer touched her head

bashfully. "My ability is nothing compared to Sister Nightingale's."

"Nightingale? Do you mean the blonde sister who always follows His Majesty around and barely shows up?"

"Yeah, she's the most powerful witch in the Western Region, or maybe in the entire kingdom!"

"Awesome!" Amy said with sparkling eyes.

"Wait," Mystery Moon suddenly interrupted them. "Look!"

Lily frowned. "This is..."

"Bullying?" Evelyn whispered.

They saw five or six ten-year-old kids corner two girls, arguing fiercely. Each of the two girls reacted in completely different ways: one stood in the front, reaching out her hands to block the other kids away from the other girl, while the other was cowering behind her with a frightened look.

As the universal primary classes did not set a school age, the oldest student in the bully group looked like to be 15 or 16 years old, taller and stronger than the two girls combined. However, the short-haired girl was not intimidated by the other side's numbers or size and just stood on bravely.

The witches could conclude from lip-reading that they were quarreling about where they came from... insults such as "go back to the Eastern Region," and "dogs of the rebel king" were being thrown around.

Soon, they started to push at each other. The tallest kid struck first, intending to push the girl down to the ground, but as soon as he grabbed the girl's shoulder with his hands, his knee was kicked by the girl and he fell hard on the ground.

The situation in the classroom immediately turned awry.

The short-haired girl slipped out of the encirclement as agile as a slippery loach, and aimed another kick towards a fatty, drawing all the attention to herself.

At this moment, everyone stopped caring about the currently weeping girl. They all sprang together towards the short-haired girl, who, cunningly, used the other students in the classroom as cover to dodge the attacks. Her small figure helped her to accurately kick the pursuers' knees or ankles, making them hunch over in pain.

"What a ferocious little devil!" Mystery Moon was astonished.

"Come on. Knock them down!" Amy could not help clenching her fist as if she was actually at the scene.

"But... she doesn't have enough strength," Vanilla said with

concern. "And continuing to attack the same places will do her no good, since it won't work a second time."

"Oh? How did you know that?" Mystery Moon looked at her in surprise.

"S-Sorry, I just used to..."

"The Church taught you that, right?" Evelyn comforted Vanilla. "That's okay. You've passed His Majesty's examination and proved that you're different from the evil Pure Witches."

Lily frowned without a word. She agreed with Vanilla. Although the students who had been kicked down looked flustered, they were able to struggle onto their feet after some time and continued to chase the girl. This time, they were more cautious and guarded their legs so that the girl had less of a chance to hit them.

Suddenly, the tallest kid lifted a chair and moved to strike her from behind with it while her attention was distracted by two other kids.

"Watch out!" Amy shouted.

But a warning shouted at someone who was in the illusion was meaningless, as the illusion only recorded what had already happened.

The chair leg hit the girl's head hard and knocked her down.

However, at the moment she fell, the girl managed to roll out and away from the attacks from the two other opponents in front of her and squatted on the floor with her hands on her head and her teeth clenched tight.

The blood had stained her fingertips.

The blood slowly trickled down past her ear, and dyed her face red.

The tallest kid was a little stunned by the fact that the girl was able to take the strong blow. He hesitated for a while before tossing the chair away and then walked up to her.

At that moment when everyone thought that she was done for, her face suddenly twisted into an anguished look as she opened her mouth to shout out loudly. Although the witches could not hear her voice, they were able to gauge the pain she was in from her look, which she did not even display when her head was hit by the chair.

Then a bolt of lightning burst out from her fingertips and were soon followed by a second, a third... The lightning spread along the floor, leaving behind twisted orange-red trails, and as soon as it touched the window, it turned into a sudden burst of light.

In a split second, a blinding explosion occurred and a loud bang sounded. The window shattered, and a large hole was blown through the wall. Everyone panicked and ran away, leaving behind the short-haired girl shrouded in lightning.

Chapter 754: The Master of Worms

"This is... an awakening?" Evelyn said in surprise.

"Most likely." Lily nodded. The pain from the first awakening was far more painful than the gash on her head due to the magic power gathered in her body and it felt like a bite. Many witches would unconsciously exert their power at that moment, which would most likely expose themselves. If it was two or three years ago, those who awakened openly would almost certainly be doomed.

Soon the lightning vanished, but it had ignited the floor and outer wall of the classroom, leaving an orange-red trail of fire along with clouds of smoke.

The short-haired girl struggled to return to her stunned friend, shouted, and grabbed her hand to drag her out of the danger area.

Lily raised her eyebrow in appreciation. It was known that the first bite had a good chance of not being fatal, but it was a feeling that a witch had never experienced before. Usually, after the bite, a witch would be weak and sweaty. It was very rare for a teenage girl to be able to control her body under such conditions, let alone, remember to come back for her companion behind her.

Since the fire triggered by the lightning was very small, the flames did not spread very fast. By the time the second half of the classroom was enveloped in flames, all the people had escaped from the teaching building.

Seeing the truth of what had happened, Summer ended the flashbacks.

"Good, we have a new sister." Lily raised the corner of her lip. She could foresee that, regardless of her ability, the girl would be a rather good witch, at least, with respect to her bravery and her will. This girl gave Lily a feeling that not every witch would be as bad as Mystery Moon.

She deliberately turned to glance at Mystery Moon who, against her expectations, stood there shocked, without giving any visual clue that she was paying attention to what was being said.

Ugh. What's wrong with this fool again?

"We have to tell Sister Wendy immediately!" Amy suggested. "There's a new witch in Neverwinter!"

"Agreed." Evelyn nodded. "Let's go to the castle now."

"Wendy probably already knew," thought Lily and shrugged, but she did not speak her thoughts out loud. She had intended to return her bedroom to continue her observation of the tiny worms after the incident and the castle was on the way back.

"Mystery Moon?" When they were about to walk toward the castle, they noticed that Mystery Moon was still riveted to the floor.

"Ah... I'm coming." She shook her head clear of any distractions and went to keep pace with the others.

"Are you alright?" Evelyn asked as she touched Mystery Moon's head.

"I'm fine..." Mystery Moon replied under her breath, looking quite different from the excited version of her when she first arrived.

"Such an odd girl." Lily could not help thinking.

Lily twitched her mouth and then took Mystery Moon's hand through which she injected a magic parent worm into her body. "Although the fool should not be infected with a cold, what if she was?"

They traveled back to the Witch Building via the Magic Ark and immediately reported to an angry Wendy, who, as they had expected, scolded them.

"There was no need for you girls to investigate the matter. Sylvie noticed the magic reaction in school when she was in the castle and has since learned everything after questioning the people there." Wendy knocked every witch's forehead with her hand. "Sneaking through the police perimeter and entering a potentially dangerous place, you are spending too much time with Lightning. Do you want to be confined to the classroom and take three practice tests like her?"

Everyone's faces changed as they heard Wendy's words. They shook their heads immediately.

"Ah, I almost forgot." Evelyn suddenly clapped her hands and said, "I have to check the tavern's stock before dinner."

"I also have a problem to consult Isabella about." Margie bowed deeply. "I'll leave first."

"Me too." Vanilla hurriedly followed her out.

"Eh?" Amy stayed for a while, still failing to come up with a reasonable excuse and ended up being dragged out of the office by Summer.

Lily sighed at the sight. "Do you really think you could escape from punishment if Wendy really intended to penalize you? It's not even a bad thing to spend a night finishing three practice tests to review what we have learned."

After Lily pushed Mystery Moon's head forward so they could apologize with a bow, they left for their bedroom.

"Now can you can tell me what happened?" After the door of their bedroom was closed, Lily rolled her eyes at her roommate who looked very sad. "Are you acting like that to gain my sympathy?"

"Lily..." Mystery Moon sniffed. "The new witch can let out electricity!"

"What is the issue then?"

"Electricity is magnetism and magnetism is electricity. In other words... I can be her and she can be me," she said worriedly. "What if her power is stronger than mine and His Majesty no longer needs me?"

"Pfft." Lily almost choked on her saliva. "Why would you say that? Even if both of you have the same ability, His Majesty will never deliberately kick someone to the side to be unused."

"But he'll always compare..."

"But you are never the same..." As Lily said that, she was suddenly stunned, "Never... the same?" The words resounded in her mind. Then she asked, "Wait, what did you say before?"

"Electricity is magnetism?"

"After that."

"Uh... she can be me."

"That's it!" Lily felt a lightbulb turn on in her head as a new idea emerged in her mind. No longer caring about Mystery Moon, she

ran to the desk, picked up a drop of water from a cup, laid it under the microscope, and started to adjust the focal length intently.

"What do you mean by that?" Mystery Moon protested. "Hey, can't you comfort me for a little longer?"

"Leave me alone!" Lily waved. "If you don't want to be overlooked, start to study more attentively from now on. By doing so, you may have some hope."

There was always a difference when comparing things. She had drawn and compared many pictures for her target worms and created parent worms based on the pictures and compared the results. However, no matter how hard she had tried, she had still failed to create a replica of the target worm. This was because she could never draw out every detail of a target worm based on her observation. Once the microscope was adjusted or a target worm moved, she would get a very different picture. A parent worm created by her based on this kind of observation would never be exactly the same as the original.

If she wanted to turn a parent worm into a particular worm, the two should first become the same thing.

Lily soon set a goal. A transparent worm looked like a rotten grape. They were very common in water and were often chosen as her test subjects.

She gently touched the slide and summoned a magic parent worm that was invisible to the naked eye. She first restrained the

parent worm's urge to assimilate the worms around it and then slowly moved its tentacles toward the transparent worm. When the two worms stuck together, the parent worm started penetrating into the target worm until its whole body turned a light purple.

Now the parent worm was the target worm and the target worm was the parent worm.

When she let go of the restriction on the parent worm's assimilation power, for the first time, she saw the parent worm did not return to its original state as it usually did. Instead, it swam in the form of the transparent worm. As time went on, the worms around it were all transformed into transparent worms as well and soon enough, the transformation spread throughout the entire droplet.

Seven or eight minutes later, she could no longer find any other tiny worms except the transparent worms.

Chapter 755: Crisis Management

Barov and Scroll walked into Roland's office together. "Your Majesty, here's the statistic analysis of the accident."

"Oh? So what exactly happened?" Roland asked with concern.

"Fortunately, no one was killed in the accident. Six students were injured. Three got fractures as they were escaping from the classroom. Two lost their hearing, which should be caused by the deafening explosions and one got severely burnt. All of them were cured by Miss Nana." Roland felt relieved after hearing City Hall Director's report.

Scroll added, "It happened during a lunch break. Hearing the loud noise, the teachers in the office immediately organized the students to evacuate. Ferlin Eltek told them that it was the First Army on maneuver and that the soldiers were simulating a counterattack against enemies attacking the school. He ordered the students to calm down and act in coordination. By doing so, he successfully controlled the panicked students except those in class six. That class witnessed the awakening of the witch and the all the injured students mentioned by Barov were in this class."

Roland praised Ferlin at once. "He's indeed Morning Light. To take advantage of the prestigious First Army as a way to restore the order and calm down the students. What he did significantly reduce the impact of the accident. As long as we take some proper remedial measures afterward, most people won't think that the awakening of a witch may be a dangerous thing."

The newly awakened witch had done her best to control her power, this was to some extent, prevented this accident from turning into a disaster. The loud bang had been caused by electric current striking through the air which formed an electric arc with the metal bolt on the window. Similar to a thunder, it was something very loud but not extremely destructive.

Agatha had quickly come to the school after the accident. Naturally adept at fighting fires, she had frozen the source of the fire in several minutes to save the main teaching building. Despite that, Roland still considered replacing the old teaching buildings with modernized concrete in case similar accidents happened again.

Barov asked, "Your Majesty, what remedial measures are we going to take?"

Roland tapped on his desk and asked, "Do you have any ideas?"

The City Hall chief thought for a moment and answered, "We have to notice two points in this accident. The first one is the reason behind the students' fight. Based on our investigation, this conflict was caused by a quarrel between some kids from the Southern Territory and Eastern Region. They were fighting about whether the Eastern Region was the home of the rebel king, as Valencia was Timothy's domain. This area hasn't surrendered to you, so..." Probably not willing to talk too much about the infighting of the royal family, Barov paused for a moment before he finished his sentence and then continued. "The kids could never know these kinds of things unless their parents were talking about them at home. To avoid such disputes, we'd better punish the

parents of those kids and ban any discussion about Timothy."

"Well... you can go ahead with that."

"My second point is how to prevent a witch's awakening from causing harm to the public. My suggestion is that no matter what you decide to do about this accident in the end, we should make it a rule in law to avoid disputes."

Without any comment, Roland gave Barov a meaningful glance, excited about his improvement.

These two years working as the chief of City Hall had indeed opened his eyes and helped him understand things in new ways. Now, he was not the assistant of the Treasurer anymore and was able to dig out the root cause of a fight among students.

However, Roland also noticed some limitations in Barov's thoughts. Times were different now, as a strong central power had started to replace the feudal aristocratic order. With greatly increased power, City Hall had to shoulder greater responsibilities. Writing a decision of the king into the law could not guarantee that everyone would uphold it. Sometimes, when it went against most of the people, making it a law would even sow the seeds of rebellion. This hidden crisis would break out sooner or later and become a thorny problem.

"What do you think?" Roland looked at Scroll.

"Your Majesty, I've some different views. Now that most subjects of Neverwinter are from different places across Graycastle, we're going to see various beliefs among them. If we ban all the disputes they have, the law will become too complex bogging down City Hall management. I suggest we guide them to mediate and to know right from wrong. This approach may work better than the law in preventing this kind of disputes."

Scroll paused to think for a moment and continued, "Regarding the second point mentioned by Barov, I think you should ask Miss Agatha for suggestions, as Taquila must have rich experience in coping with these kinds of accidents caused by the awakening of witches."

Roland picked up his teacup and slowly took a sip.

He agreed with Scroll about guiding public opinion. As compared to a 'one size fits all' solution, namely the law, offering proper guidance to the people was a better choice and at the same time a very feasible plan. Unlike feuds fueled by nationalism in the world he had lived before. The disputes happening between these different regions were much simpler. Having never been infected by any form of nationalist sentiment, the human beings in this world would easily accept the propaganda that all the people in Graycastle and in the other kingdoms were the same. Thinking about this, he decided to deal with the students involved in the fight leniently.

He also planned to write this view into teaching materials to tell all his subjects that all of us were the same kind, honest people, except for a small number of rebels with ulterior motives and that

innocent people should never be blamed for those rebels' sins.

For him, the really difficult part was how to harmonize the witches' relationships with the common people.

He wanted the witches to be well accepted and thought of as part of the people instead of being an isolated group. However, the witches were very different from common people, making it an arduous task which might last throughout the human history in this world. He could not think of a perfect solution to the problem at this moment, he decided to take it slow and follow Scroll's suggestion to learn from Taquila first.

Fortunately, this accident hadn't turned into a disaster, so he could still easily deliver his policy of integrating witches with the people.

With these thoughts in mind, Roland said, "Let's handle this dispute as an ordinary fight among students. The one who beat the girl and injured the witch with a chair must be verbally criticized and pay their medical expenses. The Witch Union will pay the medical expenses for the other wounded students in class six. City Hall needs to mend the teaching building as soon as possible to open the school again."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Barov and Scroll replied simultaneously.

"As for the remedial measures, let's do what Scroll suggested. Guide the people's opinions. I'll draft a plan for you later." He heaved a long sigh of relief. "By the way, that witch..."

"Her name is Sharon, Your Majesty. Do you want to meet her?" Scroll asked.

"No, let her have a good rest to recover for a few days. You can ask Wendy to see her and tell her the basic situation of the Witch Union."

"I see."

After Barov and Scroll left the office, Roland called Agatha and Phyllis next.

Before taking a seat, Agatha said solemnly, "Your Majesty, I've got something to tell you. The awakenings of witches in Neverwinter doesn't seem quite right."

Chapter 756: Magic Power Tide

Roland was startled, "Is there anything wrong?"

After a little hesitation, Phyllis said, "Here's the thing... We heard that within the last year, only one witch awakened here. Is it true?"

Roland took out a name list that was made by Wendy from his drawer. He could easily look up each witch's Day of Awakening and Day of Adulthood on it, it was prepared in the case that he would forget these important dates.

After checking the list, he nodded and said, "Yes, two witches joined the Witch Union last year during Months of Demons. One is Paper, who awakened three years ago, the other one is Summer, who awakened last year on her Day of Adulthood."

Phyllis knitted her eyebrows, saying, "That's not right, Your Majesty. How many people did Neverwinter have in the last year? 20,000 or 30,000?"

Roland could not help but feel proud when talking about the population growth. "Probably 50,000, and this year there are already over 100,000 people in the city."

"A city of over 100,000 people resembles Arrieta in the early days. When we retreated from the Fertile Plains, Taquila only had 250,000 people. However... do you know how many witches awakened every year in those two cities?" Phyllis' voice turned

deep. "Even when the magic power tide touched the bottom, Arrieta had at least 10 newly awakened witches every year... Taquila's number tripled that."

"Magic power tide... touched the bottom?"

Agatha explained, "Yes. The magic power prevailing in this world has ups and downs like tides. Two years after the arrival of the Bloody Moon is the peak of magic power, during this period of time, new witches will awaken everyday. After the peak, the power will decline around the world. With the magic power at low tide, this period between two arrivals of the Bloody Moon will only see witches awaken during the Months of Demons."

Roland had heard it from Agatha that more awakenings of the witches would happen when the magic power was strong. However, he had only known that the power would have a peak every year during the Months of Demons and never thought that it had several-hundred-year cyclical fluctuations. He was surprised, saying, "But the third Battle of Divine Will is close."

Phyllis looked worried, saying, "This is what we're worried about. Fearful Beast of Hell appeared, which means the Bloody Moon is about to come. During this period of time, the magic power should get stronger than usual, and it will, according to Celine's test results. Given this, lots of witches should awaken now. If they are not in the city, they should awaken in nearby towns and villages. Back in the Taquila age, our domains around the Holy City offered more witches than the city did. Based on the Union's experiences, a city with a growing population should see a significant increase in the number of newly awakened witches. But

why don't we see many new witches appearing in Neverwinter?"

Agatha said slowly, "At first I guessed it might be because the city deliberately avoided recruiting girls or because the newly awakened witches were too afraid of the church to expose themselves and join Neverwinter. However, now it seems that I was clearly wrong. We've discussed with Pasha and come to a conclusion. We think that some unknown factor may be affecting the awakenings of new witches... and its influence is gradually expanding."

After a long thoughtful pause, Roland asked, "If that's the case, will you be able to find out the factor?"

Agatha and Phyllis looked at each other and then shook their heads.

He threw up his hands, saying, "As you don't know what to do about it now, let's assume that the deities are just having a rest. No matter how many witches awaken every year, we still have to drive the demons out of the Land of Dawn."

With that being said, he had to admit that if he had not established the basis of industrialization, which significantly reduced his needs for the God's Punishment Army or the Chosen One, this news would have been terrible for him.

Surprised by Roland's reaction, Phyllis remained speechless for quite a long while before she said, "You're... right. We've got to defeat the demons no matter what."

"That's it." He smiled. "Ah... by the way, I called you here because I want to ask you something about the Union. Recently, I'm a little worried about the harmful accidents caused by the awakenings of new witches. How did you handle these kind of things back in Taquila?"

"Your Majesty, it's simple. At that time, all the people knew the 'half-quarter of an hour rule'." Phyllis was now speaking to Roland with a greater respect.

"'Half-quarter of an hour rule'?"

She further explained, "Yes, Your Majesty. There's a warning before each awakening. The free magic power will need about half a quarter to cohere inside a new witch's body. During this period of time, she will initially feel a slight sting and a mild burning sensation in the stomach, after, the the pain will keep on getting worse until she feels the first magic bite. Usually, stronger girls will be able to endure greater pains, but even they will still feel a prick in the beginning."

She paused for a moment and continued, "According to the 'half-quarter of an hour rule', when a new witch loudly announced that she was about to awaken, all the people nearby had to leave as soon as possible. If they stayed in the place and thus got hurt or killed, the Union wouldn't pay them any compensation. We only paid for the damages she caused to a place."

Hearing this, Roland thought to himself, "This is indeed a nice

solution, but it only works when everyone is very familiar with witches, especially young girls. They must learn when to announce their awakening instead of taking the sign as a common stomach ache."

He asked, "What if the new witch caused harm to the other witches?"

"If she didn't make the announcement, she would get fined or a caning punishment based on the damage she caused. If she did, the Union would take full responsibility for her. However, things like this were rare, since only a few of us were combat witches and a newly awakened combat witch could seldom cause harm to anyone."

"This is to say, back in the Taquila age, if some common people failed to escape from the scene where a witch awakened, the Union would only say it was their bad luck. It's understandable as witches were superior to the common people at that time, but not in this age," Roland thought and decided he simply could not copy this rule.

Meanwhile, he also noticed the good part about this 'half-quarter of an hour rule'. At least, it had raised the public awareness of the dangers that might be caused by the awakenings of witches and made the people understand that witches were human beings and every girl might have a chance to become a witch. This rule reminded him of traffic signals in the world where he had lived before, everybody knew red for stop, green for go and had to follow this rule to prevent damage.

As now it was not the Taquila age anymore, he decided that he could not let the witches get away with all the damage they caused during awakening. He thought, "I'd better revise this rule, treating the witches and the common people as equals. Let City Hall take care of the damages caused by a new witch who makes the announcement before her awakening. As for the witches who don't make announcements and cause severe damage, they must be put on trials for negligently injuring others... Or, I can formulate a special law to regulate the witches' behavior, which may be able to ease the tension between the witches and the common people."

Chapter 757: Sharon

...

Wendy walked into the hospital with a dinner box in hand and there she saw Nana's father Tigui Pine talking with a man and a woman. They bowed and then bent their knees, acting as if they were going to get down on their knees, but Viscount Tigui stopped them at once. This went on for quite a long while and then they bowed to him and left reluctantly.

When they got out of the hospital, Wendy came to him and asked curiously, "Who're they?"

Tigui shrugged and said, "Who else could they be? They're the parents of the new witch. They were worried about leaving her alone in the hospital and were asking whether they could take her home. After I told them it was the king who wanted her to stay here, they immediately changed their attitude and expressed gratitude to His Majesty." Wendy sensed a little disappointment and pride in his last sentence.

Wendy couldn't stop herself from laughing, "You think every parent is like you, who dare to break into the lord's castle for his daughter."

She knew why he felt disappointed. He believed that parents should never hand their kids over to anyone else, even if a king asked. When Nana had awakened, he had gone directly to Roland's castle without a letter of introduction. Fortunately, the kind and

merciful Prince Roland had never intended to do any harm to her, so this incident had ended up becoming a moving story. If he had intruded into the castle of Duke Ryan or any other great noble in the Western Region to save Nana, he would have never been able to get off so easily.

Although that story had happened before Wendy had come to Border Town, she had heard it from Nightingale repeatedly. That was why she naturally understood where Tigui's pride came from.

"At least, they're way better than Summer's parents," Wendy sighed.

Summer's parents had hurriedly sent her to the castle to get one gold royal when she awakened to be a witch. They had treated her like a slave they had sold to the king and the Witch Union and warned her not to refuse any of their requests. If it hadn't been for the money they would've got, they probably would not let her return home.

Disappointed by her family, Summer did not return home as often as before once she got used to living with all the sisters in the Witch Building.

As a witch, she could be considered as lucky.

However, as a daughter, she had been abandoned by her parents.

Tigui nodded and agreed with Wendy. "Indeed, they are. One of

them works in the Furnace Area and the other is a handyman in the construction team. They had no idea what happened to her until they finished their jobs, but as soon as they heard the news, they hurried here without even having dinner. I can tell from their faces, they do care about the girl."

Wendy smiled and said, "It looks like I was right to bring this dinner box with me. Could you take me to Sharon?"

Tigui touched his beard and said, "Of course, please follow me."

...

After the restructure and extension, this hospital now had an inpatient department, but only a few patients would stay here, as Nana and Lily could cure most of the patients in Neverwinter in a short time. They usually just needed to stay in the hall of the hospital for a while to fully recover.

Considering that the influence of the church might still exist, Roland had asked the hospital to let Sharon stay. He was not sure whether all the people who had immigrated from the other districts of Graycastle could accept the witches as one of them. By keeping her in the hospital, at least, he could ensure that she would not become homeless or get hurt by her family.

Tigui and Wendy came to the recovery ward. He gently pushed the door open and waved to Nana by the bed. "It's time dinner. You can talk to your friend later."

"She's not going to have dinner with us?" Nana asked surprised. She then saw Wendy and said, "Sister Wendy. You also came."

Wendy smiled and patted the dinner box in her hand, saying, "I brought her dinner."

Nana said, "Oh, I see. You guys talk first. I'll come back later." She said goodbye to Sharon and left the ward with her father.

Wendy walked to the bed and put the dinner box on the bedside cupboard. She turned around and met Sharon's eyes. The new witch was looking at her, her face curious. Wendy asked, "How do you feel about becoming a witch?"

The girl had a childish face and short rosy hair. It was a rare hair color in Graycastle and reminded her of a rosebud. Wendy knew for sure that she would become more beautiful after her awakening. She could already imagine how extraordinary she would look once she would enter adulthood.

Sharon replied, "I felt that something got into my body... Miss Nana told me that was the magic power." She pursed her lips and continued, "Are you a witch, too? Does it always hurt the first time?"

Though her second question could cause some ambiguity, she knew exactly what she was talking about. "Yes, I'm a witch. You can call me Wendy. As for your second question, not really... It's not that important anyway. As long as you learn how to use the magic power, it'll become part of you, like your arms and legs."

With these words, she opened the iron dinner box and put the steaming food on the bedside cupboard.

Sharon swallowed twice to prevent herself from drooling, but she could not stop her stomach from growling.

She blushed with embarrassment at once.

"Are you hungry?" Wendy smiled and immediately placed a Bird Beak Mushrooms soup in front of the little girl.

Some scallions were floating in the light yellow soup. The oil on the surface was shimmering in the firelight. Compared to a light vegetable soup, the smell of the meat made this soup much more tempting.

Wendy had learned this trick of using nice food to reassure people from Roland who liked to hold a banquet to welcome new witches.

Sharon nodded vigorously.

Wendy said softly, "Drink some soup to warm your stomach first before you eat other food."

Soon the little girl started to gobble down her dinner, making even Wendy feel hungry, too.

She asked, "Where's your friend? Did she go home?"

Sharon said while devouring her food, "I don't know... probably yes."

Wendy was surprised. "Didn't she come to see you?"

"No..." Sharon shook her head. " She probably did not trust me completely. After all, I also came from the Southern Territory like those students who bullied her."

Wendy was startled. "What? You're from the Southern Territory?"

"Yeah." The little girl stuffed a piece of Bird Beak Mushroom into her mouth. "Mapleflower Town, a small town near Eagle City... but now it's uninhabitable."

Wendy exclaimed, "I thought you're from the east just like her. I thought that was why you helped her."

"I shouldn't help her as we're from different regions?" Sharon blinked her eyes and said seriously, "the disputes among the nobles obviously have nothing to do with her. Those guys just wanted to find some excuse to bully her. No matter where we came from, wrong is wrong. If I didn't stand out to stop them, nobody would correct such a mistake."

She remained speechless for a while, lost in her thoughts.

Your Majesty, you were worried about nothing. This girl doesn't need me to comfort her.

I can tell from the expression in her eyes—She's absolutely certain about her decision.

Chapter 758: Inherited Belief

"Did you learn this from your parents?"

Sharon nodded and said, "Yes, mainly from my father. He often told me that many things in the world were wrong because no one corrected them, and then people would get used to these wrong ideas as time went by. He taught me that many common things might be wrong and that if none of us stood out to fix them, we would repeat these mistakes and thus make the world worse and worse."

Wendy said slowly, "But unfortunately nobody would be willing to stand out unless the bad things happened to himself. Just like before, when the church persecuted the witches, most people only cared about the gold royals they could get from the church instead of thinking whether those hanged kids were really evil."

Sharon said, "What they did is wrong. They thought those mistakes would do no harm to themselves, so they could repeat them for their personal interests. However, the mistakes will make the world worse, and then it'll become everyone's problem."

Surprised by Sharon, Wendy could not help but feel curious about her parents. She pretended to ask casually about them but instead got an unexpected answer. "They're not my real parents," Sharon said.

"They're not?"

As the girl began to talk about her parents, she started eating slower. "Well, my parents are dead. The war destroyed Eagle City and the order of the Southern Territory. After that, homeless refugees and beggars were everywhere and so were robbers. My parents were members of the patrol team, fighting against them, one day, they just didn't... return home. In the end, the lord of the town fled. Seeing that, all the townspeople left, too. Nowadays, Mapleflower Town had already become a deserted domain."

"In other words, this tragedy was caused by the 'Royal Decree on the Selection of Crown Prince' ." Just as her father said, this absurd decree which seemed to be irrelevant to the people turned out to be a disaster for them."

Wendy gently touched Sharon's head to comfort her, saying, "I'm sorry... for bringing up these things."

The little girl quickly stopped mourning her parents' death. She dispelled her sadness and recovered, saying, "That's alright. They were already prepared to sacrifice themselves... My father often said that since mistakes would cost us greatly in the end, we'd better pay the price to correct those mistakes in the first place, which was an honor actually."

Wendy was moved, thinking, "Honor... Most patrol team members wouldn't give a damn. They behave like Rats, placing personal benefits above those of the public. When order and discipline stand in the way of personal interests, they won't hesitate to break them. Given that, Sharon's real parents were really rare and respectable."

After a long silence, she said, "Those people who came to see you..."

Sharon licked her fingers and said, "they're my father's friends. He helped them before. In the past two years, I've lived with him, uncle Cormac, and his wife. They don't have any kid and treat me like their own daughter."

Wendy fell silent, thinking, "They did do their best to take care of Sharon. That's quite a rare thing for an ordinary family."

After that, she did not say anything and just looked at Sharon eating her dinner.

The little girl finished her last deep-fried pork cutlet and heaved a long sigh of relief, looking satisfied. "Thank you. This is the best dinner I've ever had."

Now that Neverwinter was able to provide plenty of food for the people, no one in the city was worried about being hungry anymore. However, meat was still a rare thing on tables of ordinary families. People of which would feel greatly satisfied to simply have a piece of dried meat in their oatmeal. As for this kind of deep-fried half lean meat, only highly paid people such as the alchemists and officials in City Hall could afford them.

Wendy took out a handkerchief to wipe Sharon's oily mouth and said, "after you join the Witch Union, you can eat dinner like this everyday."

Sharon's eyes shined and asked, "Really? I'll be able to have meat every day?"

Wendy put the dishes back into the dinner box and said, "of course, and you'll have fresh boar meat instead of the cured meat in the Convenience Market. His Majesty prefers the streaky pork, but not every boar has that quality... Only the extra fat ones will have this kind of pork. If it's steamed, it'll be soft and tender and melt in your mouth. If it's fried, it'll be crisp and smell really good. Ah, by the way, he likes to call this kind of pork 'Five flower meat'... but I really don't get why it's related to some flower."

Thanks to Lightning and Maggie who liked to hunt and toast their preys in the wild whenever they were on patrol. The Witch Union members could enjoy the tasty food every day. In the past, they could only bring back few toasted rabbits and bird eggs, but since Maggie had the ability to evolve into a Winged Devilbeast, the number of their preys had increased drastically. They could bring back boars and snow wolves now, and if Roland required them to bring meat back, they could fill the castle's basement with their preys within a day.

Wendy once had wondered why His Majesty had called the Misty Forest a great treasure trove which had not been fully utilized yet, but now seeing the tasty food on the table everyday she believed what he had said.

"How come you know this sort of thing? Could it be..." Sharon asked surprised, with her hand covering her mouth.

Wendy could not help but smile. "Yes, that's right. As long as His

Majesty isn't very busy, he will always eat with the witches."

"What about the one gold royal..."

"That's also true."

The little girl pointed to herself. "May I..."

"Join the Witch Union?" Wendy chuckled. "Of course, you can. The union will guide you to use and improve your ability and at the same protect and take care of you. We accept all the witches who're willing to work for His Majesty and Neverwinter as our sisters."

"After joining it, do I have to live in the castle?"

"It's up to you. If you want to spend more time with your family, you can still live at home," Wendy explained. She could tell that Sharon had already taken uncle Cormac and his wife as her family, though they were not related by blood.

"What about the school..."

"The union offers special courses for the witches. As we're able to learn faster and need to learn more, the universal education doesn't suit us." Wendy paused to think for a moment. "In your case, you'll be required to practice your ability in the beginning, as you're still very young. As for the courses for witches, they're usually arranged in the evening. If you can manage to go to school

at the same time, you'll be able to finish your universal education and get a diploma."

Without any hesitation, Sharon nodded vigorously, saying, "I want to join the Witch Union. I want to become someone like Miss Nana."

Even if she hadn't said it aloud, Wendy could still see the answer from her eyes' expression—Just like in her questioning before, the girl was certain about every decision she made.

Wendy thought, "It seems that I can move up the date of her ability test and the contract signing."

Chapter 759: Second Transformation

The next day afternoon, Roland received Sharon's ability report.

"That's fast." He raised his eyebrows as Wendy handed him the test sheets. "Has she accepted that she's now a witch?"

"Yes, and in a calmer way than we'd expected." Wendy laughed as she recounted the meeting from the previous night. "I've to say, her parents have brought up a fine child."

"Hmm..." Roland was rather impressed himself. In this era, someone who could make such far-sighted considerations would already be considered a pioneer. Perhaps, this was how history had always been driven. As a belief was passed down the generations, more and more people were imbued with the same aspiration, and when the numbers reached a certain level, the world would undergo an extraordinary change.

As they say, a little spark can kindle a great fire.

Perhaps, Mankind had reached civilization by taking small steps like this.

He examined the details of the test, particularly the evaluation of magic power. As a witch who was awakened at the young age of 15, Sharon's magic cyclone ability was of an above-average standard. It was even noted in the report that this was comparable to adult witches in Taquila. Evidently, Phyllis was present during the test - among the witches in Neverwinter City, she was often the one who

was most receptive to the arrival of new witches.

Sharon's ability was to generate electric currents. However, Wendy's write-up on this section was rather vague, perhaps because the study of electricity was one of the more difficult topics within elementary physics.

When she increased the intensity of her electric currents, the consumption of magic power would rapidly increase, but her electric currents would become strong enough to break wooden planks and melt iron. At a weaker intensity, she would need to touch the object to produce an effect, such as lighting a light bulb, albeit she was prone to burning the filament.

As Sharon had only recently awakened, her control of magic power was very unstable. Wendy's conclusion was that she was most suited to be a combat witch, while also having potential to assist in production.

Roland had no plans to do a retest. After all, he had no tools to measure electrical voltage and current, and therefore would not be able to obtain exact values.

Furthermore, Sharon would have to expend a lot of magic power to release high-voltage electric current. Her ability to maintain the transmission of electricity was obviously not as good as Mystery Moon's Dawn I, let alone an electromagnetic gun.

But most importantly, all effects that were produced by magic power, whether it be Anna's blackfire or Sharon's electric current,

did not necessarily comply with the related theories. Only when the abilities were transformed for a second time into other effects would they correspond with the knowledge he had.

In sum, it was already clear that Sharon's ability had a lot of potential. Roland was certainly eager to know what kind of progress could be made when the essence of electric current was fully understood, as well as to see how much Sharon's magic power would improve by as she grew older. But for now, it was best to follow Wendy's recommendation to allow Sharon to practice on her own and focus on her studies, in which she had some catching up to do.

Roland thought about her strong sense of justice, and suddenly had an idea to admit her into the judiciary one day.

"An electricity-generating young lady patrolling the streets and arresting criminals... this seems to be exceptionally familiar."

Without revealing his thoughts aloud, he nodded at Wendy and said, "We'll do as you've recommended, many thanks."

"My honor, Your Majesty," Wendy bowed.

...

When Roland returned to his office after dinner, he discovered that Lily and Mystery Moon had joined Nightingale in the room. The trio were gathered around the desk and seemed to be in an

argument.

"Take a look at this." Nightingale gestured towards Roland. "My goodness, they look so real!"

"What is it?" Roland walked up to the desk curiously, and only then noticed the two pots of bird beak mushrooms placed on the table.

"Eh... what's with these mushrooms?" One pot of mushrooms seemed rather shrivelled like kitchen stock, while the other was much fresher and juicier. He pinched a mushroom stalk from the latter, causing its sap to gush out immediately. "This is quite fresh. Were these recently picked by Lightning?"

Nightingale and Mystery Moon turned to look at Lily in unison.

Lily shrugged her shoulders. "I used my magic power to create them."

"Oh... magic power?" Roland casually replied before he startled violently. "Wait... what? You used magic power to create them?"

"Your Highness, her cohering ability has changed somewhat," Nightingale explained. "If, let's say, it was only a purple worm after the first evolution, it has now added patterns on its back. Her magic power capacity has also increased." After a brief pause, she continued, "In other words, Lily's ability has evolved a second time."

"But still, they're worms!" Mystery Moon chimed in. Of course, this provoked a look of disgust from Lily.

"Is this so?" Roland joyfully picked up another mushroom and examined it carefully. He quickly understood how she had created them. "You're now able to make a magical swarm of worms turn into a particular form that you want?"

"Yes. But they must at least be visible through a microscope, and a suitable target must be found, before the next step of assimilation can be transacted." Lily nodded. Although she acted very calm, the glimmer in her eyes gave away her inner delight. "Because the worms produced by bird beak mushrooms are relatively easier to observe, I chose them for this experiment."

She was most likely referring to fungal spore, which was also the building block of fungi. Roland started to feel excited. Perhaps, to Lily, organisms which were invisible to the naked eye, such as microscopic bugs, could now be controlled.

"Excellent!" He reached out his hand and caressed her forehead.

Unexpectedly, Lily did not move away or roll her eyes at him. Instead, she lowered her head and accepted his compliments.

"How is that any good." Mystery Moon grumbled. "Your Highness, my bedroom is no longer inhabitable! There are bird beak mushrooms everywhere, even on my bed, which now resembles the Misty Forest after a rain!"

Lily's cheeks suddenly reddened. She glanced at Mystery Moon and said, "I... I don't know why it would be like this either... At first, the worms couldn't turn into bird beak mushrooms at all, and I even thought that there was a problem with the parent I was using. After I changed the parent, I didn't imagine that the whole house would grow full of mushrooms."

When Roland understood the whole story, he could not help but laugh aloud. From the little knowledge of biology he remembered, unlike a seed which could grow into a large tree, a single mushroom spore could not grow into a mushroom, no matter how much assimilation was done. Only after the parent mushroom was changed, two spores might combine and grow into mushrooms. The reason why they grew everywhere was likely to be because the parent was discarded within the room, where it drifted around and assimilated bacteria into bird beak mushroom spores.

"We shall have a mushroom feast for lunch tomorrow." He announced gleefully.

Indubitably, after Lily's second transformation, her ability was no longer limited to sterilization and disinfection. Any observable thing could be wholly transformed for next to no cost, and could be multiplied and expanded like a regular microbe, so as to form a complete 'microscopic' army of its own. Whether it be food production or war preparation, she would be able to play a great role from now onwards.

Chapter 760: Land of Fire

...

Flames spouted out of the ground like monstrous giant trees. The flame tips were the branches, while the billows of thick smoke were the leaves. These "trees" were interconnected in such a way that they formed a vast black canopy.

As Thuram walked underneath these fiery trees, he felt the temperature around him continuously rise. Pea-sized beads of sweat sprung from his forehead, while he felt that his entire back had already turned sticky. This place was a world apart from the cold desert outside, all because the chilly winds of the Months of Demons had no way to encroach into the core area of Mother Earth.

"Is this why it's called the Land of Fire..." The golden-haired Divine Lady looked around the place curiously. "I never thought there would be such an interesting place in the Southernmost Region."

Having interacted with Iron Axe's party members for a week, Thuram was beginning to know them a little. For example, the Divine Lady who spoke was called Andrea. Her excellent proficiency in archery was a class apart from even the most seasoned hunter in Sand Nation. There was no doubt that she would be participating in the imminent holy duel alongside the almighty Lady Ashes.

"Interesting?" Ashes puckered her lips. "I feel that this place is like a steamer, where any ordinary person would turn into cooked food after just two days."

"I'm not surprised you would say this sort of thing." Andrea shrugged her shoulders. "Someone with no taste and style would naturally be unable to appreciate the ambience here."

"Did you lose your towel? You don't look any stylish with all that sweat on you."

"Buzz off!"

Thuram felt a little affinity with Lady Andrea. To him, the most beautiful place in Southernmost Region was not the Silver Stream Oasis where the Mojin Clan lived and reproduced, but instead, was the flame-spouting Land of Fire as well as the Endless Cape. Although these places were fraught with danger, they also symbolised great strength and were the habitats of the gods, and therefore were the sources of the Ironsand people's faith. The former of these places was used to contend for status and power, and was where clans showcased their bravery and tenacity to Mother Earth. The latter was used to make offerings to the sea deity, in hopes that he would bless the clanspeople and inject more blood into the Silver Stream so that new oases could form in the desert.

The terrain of the Land of Fire was caved downwards, with a slight upward bulge in the middle. Its shape was like that of an inverted basin, and its size could accommodate several Iron Sand Citys. The ever-raging flames had caused the surrounding sand to

harden and consolidate, such that walking on the sand felt as though stepping into a palace paved with stone bricks.

On both sides of the wide and firm pavement were dark abysses and shafts. The underground fire spouted out of these shafts and continually baked the earth. The most astonishing thing was the colors - the first time any Ironsand person walked into this holy ground, they would certainly be fascinated by the gorgeous hues. Beginning from the abysses, the palisades on each side displayed varying tints of a crimson luster, which became darker as they approached the surface. This assortment of colors was akin to that of a carbon stone which had been burned until it was bright red and underwent continuous cooling.

However, once the palisades reached the surface, the color abruptly changed into a bright verdure, such that the sand seemed to be paved with a layer of glittering jade stones. The glass-like bodies, which were created through the melting and recrystallization of the gravel, refracted a dazzling glow under the flames.

Above that was, of course, the timeless motif of the place - the orange-red raging flames. A dozen pillars of flame spouted out of the basin and, as if to welcome the arrival of a new challenger, encircled the high platform in the central zone, which served as the most important place in the Land of Fire: the site of the holy duel.

Here, shades of red and green intermixed, and were further complemented by the underground blackwater and the faraway golden dunes. At first glance, it seemed like all the colors of the

desert were gathered in this place. If it wasn't during the Months of Demons, one could even see the sun rays permeating through the dense smoke in the sky. Only the underwater Endless Cape, which also roared with flames, could compare to this extraordinary sight.

"I agree that this place is really beautiful... but it would be even better without the fighting and bloodshed," Thuram's new owner and the princess of Osha, Drow Silvermoon, suddenly spoke. "As His Highness Roland said, if it simply remained as a scenic place, it would have been a famous..."

"National natural park?" Another petite Divine Lady, Hummingbird, suggested.

"Yes. That's what His Highness said after he checked out Devil's Town behind the snow mountain."

"It's certainly fitting of a king to think exactly like me." Andrea tipped up her chin.

"C'mon, have you ever seen the place he was talking about?" Ashes scoffed.

"It doesn't matter if I didn't because I have a good imagination. From his words alone, I'm sure it's a place of magnificent scenery. Of course, a person with limited experience won't understand."

"Heyy!"

Whenever Iron Axe or the Divine Ladies spoke, they would inadvertently mention the King of Graycastle's name. Thuram was terribly curious about exactly what kind of person Roland Wimbledon was, that the Ironsand people and the Divine Ladies trusted him this much, particularly the latter. He once heard a traveling merchant comment that the Divine Ladies revered by the Mojin Clan were actually evil figures being hunted down by the church in the Four Kingdoms. Yet, judging from the way they spoke of the king, things were considerably different from what the merchant had said.

When the party climbed on to the platform, the awaiting Cut Bone clan warriors started to make hissing noises, while the other clans looked on contemptuously. There was no question that the thunderous might of Iron Sand City had greatly frightened them. It was later on that Thuram learned that the Stone Castle which the chief of Ironwhip, Rubaka, lived in had collapsed amid the explosions, causing him to perish along with his kin and men. Thus the six large clans swiftly became five, and for a long time, this loss could not be replaced.

However, revenge was an unalterable part of the Ironsand people's identity. The blood feud between the Ironwhip and Osha clans was no secret. And, as no warrior of a different clan had ever invaded Iron Sand City, Drow Silvermoon's plan for revenge seemed impeccable. Thus, the other clans could only watch on with shock and fear, or otherwise remained as indifferent as possible.

What they did not know was that this time, the Osha clan's goal exceeded everyone's imagination. Thuram mused, "The Cut Bone

clan is only the beginning. Every one of the clans present will be challenged to a duel sooner or later. They'll either have to try their best or be crushed by Drow Silvermoon."

The chief of the Raging Flare clan, who was serving as the duel's arbiter, walked in front of the audience and announced, "May Osha's chief step forth."

Drow inhaled a deep breath, took a step forward, and slowly replied, "I am."

The former nodded stolidly and continued, "Great. This isn't your first time participating in a holy duel, and thus I expect that you already know the rules. Cut Bone clan shall be sending out 22 men for this battle. You may start to select weapons for your warriors. While the promise you made to the Three Gods mustn't be broken, you're allowed to give up or surrender at any time. Otherwise, the side with the last man standing will be declared the winner, and be conferred the right to enter Iron Sand City. The duel shall commence when both sides are ready."

Chapter 761: Holy Duel

Weapon shelves were placed on both sides of the platform for the convenience of both dueling parties.

Most common weapons were available, including knives, swords, and whips. For the sake of fairness, neither party was allowed to bring their own weapons. After all, a large clan would definitely be capable of forging superior blades, while a poorer challenger would have to rely on their crude equipment. This disparity would cause the duel to lose its meaning.

However, Thuram knew full well that there were ways around the rules. As a matter of fact, Iron Whip had defeated Osha previously by covertly swapping the provided whips for Blackwater versions. Although the arbiter punished the weapons supervisor later on, the result had already been finalized, and no one would contest a large clan on behalf of a fallen clan.

However, it was completely unexpected that Osha would rise from the verge of death.

Even the strongest of clans now felt pressured by its ferocious might.

This was the first time Thuram had seen the chief of Wildflame look on at the new challenger with a solemn look in his eyes.

"Is every warrior limited to one weapon?" Ashes suddenly asked.

"Err... there's no such rule." Thuram regained his attention. "You're allowed to carry as many as you wish."

"Great, I'm ready." She attached two scimitars around her waist, weighed a large sledgehammer in her hands, and further took up a wooden shield. "These should be enough to last me until the end."

Thuram gulped in amazement. Although he long knew that this black-haired and golden-eyed Divine Lady was extremely powerful, it now seemed like he had underestimated her. Most people required many years of training to use the double-handed sledgehammer, yet she was able to wield it with a single hand and with the ease of a small rapier. She would certainly be a nightmare opponent for any enemy. Clearly, she did not exert her full strength during the conflict in the tavern, or the entire place would have been demolished.

"I'm ready too." Andrea casually chose a short bow and deliberately reduced the number of arrows in the quiver to just 22.

"Get on the platform," Iron Axe muttered.

"Wait!" Thuram froze in surprise. "Just four of you?" He took a glance at the Graycastle warriors behind him. The 50-strong contingent was scattered around the place with their backs against the weapon shelves. They peered vigilantly at the onlooking crowd, with no intention of choosing weapons.

"There's no rule on the number of participants either, right?"

Ashes coolly replied. "Four's enough."

According to the rules, the number of participating warriors from each side should be between 15 to 30 people. The upper limit was set out of consideration of the space on the platform. However, there was also a stipulation that the number of participants from the challenger clan should not exceed that of the challenged clan. That meant that if the opponent sent out 15 warriors, Osha would be allowed to send out no more than 15 warriors too.

This stipulation was borne out of a harsh truth: no matter which side won or lost, heavy casualties were expected, and it was common for more than half of the participants to be either critically or fatally wounded. There had certainly been duels in which only one warrior was left standing. Thus, the greater the number of participants, the heavier the losses of each participating clan would be. It was uncommon for one side to send out 30 or more warriors, unless the challenged clan knew beforehand that the challenger clan would not be able to send out an equivalent number of warriors, and might hence use this method to obtain a numerical advantage.

Cut Bone's decision to send out 22 men certainly took into account that even if they lost the duel, there would not be too much impact on their clan's strength. It would not be the end of the world if they lost control of Iron Sand City to the challenger. As long as they still had brave warriors in their ranks, they would have the chance to mount a comeback in the future.

For Osha, the right thing to do would be to send out an

equivalent number of participants. Although the Greycastle warriors looked short and frail, and did not seem brave enough for a battle like this, Osha would still have a huge advantage with Ashes around. Her innate strength, while unaffected by God's Stones of Retaliation, would be sufficient to determine the duel's outcome.

But the scenario would be completely different with just four people. The Divine Ladies were certainly adept at leading and helping people to survive in the harsh conditions of the desert, and were rightly revered for that, but that did not mean they were equally suitable for combat. Furthermore, the opponents were more than likely to equip God's Stones of Retaliation, which would easily suppress the Divine Ladies' abilities, such that they might even become weaker than regular people.

If Drow Silvermoon and Andrea lost their combat abilities, only Iron Axe and Ashes would be left to fight. No matter how strong the latter was, it would be impossible for her to handle being surrounded by 20 or so opponents who were each willing to sacrifice their lives in order to secure the victory. With only two hands and two legs, she would certainly not be able to parry every blow.

Thuram had thought all these would be common knowledge to Iron Axe since he had participated in holy duels before. Having not been asked to attend the strategy discussion, Thuram did not pay much much attention to their decisions, in line with the principle that "he who asks less lives longer". Yet, he never expected the latter to be this negligent.

He stood aghast as the four of them walked on to the platform nonchalantly. He shuddered involuntarily and cold sweat began to pour from his forehead. Yet, at the same time, he felt like he was standing naked in a frosty desert... as though the fire "trees" surrounding the place were no longer able to shelter him from the cruel winds.

He should know that he's a member of the Osha clan!

If he fails, would I still have a place in the small oasis? I'll probably not even be able to remain in Southernmost Region!"

"If I'd known, I would have thrown all the clanspeople to him. Then he won't dare to take this sort of risk."

The appearance of the four people on the platform shook the crowd greatly too. Although sending on fewer participants than the opponent was a symbol of confidence and courage, in this case pitching four people against 22 battle-hardened tribal warriors was virtually suicide.

The hissing noises dissipated at once.

The eyes of every onlooker widened, and the apathy on their faces turned into astonishment and dismay.

"Do you confirm that the Osha party shall consist of just the four of you?" In view of such a strange sight, the chief of Wildflame felt compelled to inquire.

"That's right." Ashes grinned slightly. "Let's get on with it. By the way, have you guys written your wills?"

The audience burst into an uproar.

"Who's this lass?"

"She must be delusional!"

"Surely even Divine Ladies won't be able to resist the God's Stone Arrows?"

"Wait, I've a feeling she's serious..."

"I feel the same. She seems to have as much blood on her hands as me."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm a warrior and know this from experience. My heartbeat also says that she's absolutely frightening."

"But there're just four of them!"

"We'll know the answer shortly."

In a matter of minutes, the situation on the sidelines had changed greatly. Everyone's attention was fixed on the platform, and the initial apathy was replaced with a warm excitement. Even if it was a suicide mission, the courage of the Osha party was praiseworthy. And the Ironsand people were never reluctant to show respect for those who were truly brave.

Upon hearing the rumblings from the audience, Thuram began to hesitate. "Are they really confident of victory in spite of the huge numerical disadvantage?"

As a flurry of confused thoughts ran through his mind, the arbiter rang a gong that was hung at one corner of the platform.

"Without further ado, I shall announce that the holy duel between the challenging Osha clan and the challenged Cut Bone clan begins... now!"

Chapter 762: Music, Rapid Fire, and Strength!

Once the announcement was made, the Cut Bone warriors immediately drew their weapons, and without performing the slightest of probes, they encircled the four opponents from both flanks.

No matter how well-thought-out Osha's plan was, they were but four people.

It was impossible for them to control even their own half of the arena. When the 22 warriors completed the encirclement, the Osha party would face attacks from all directions.

These warriors lived to duel, and thus had no apprehension toward a life-and-death battle. From the moment they stepped on the platform, they had already dedicated their lives to the Three Gods.

This was not only a contention for power, but also a fight to delight the gods.

Suddenly, they heard a sad and mellow singing voice.

Drow Silvermoon's song swiftly drowned out the blusters from the underground fire and the Styx River.

The melody was ethereal and smooth, and sounded as if it came from the distant horizon. Deep feelings of loss, suffering and grief were embedded in the song, such that anyone who heard it could not help bursting into tears.

This made the Cut Bone warriors pause their footsteps.

"No... stop that!"

"What... are you doing?"

"Stop it! You're blaspheming this holy place!"

"Heretic!"

"I'll kill you!"

The onlookers' expressions changed dramatically. Some pointed at the Cut Bone clan and berated them, while others hid their faces and cried as if they had encountered a sorrowful incident.

Thuram could not believe what he was about to see.

The Cut Bone warriors turned with murderous intent towards their own clanspeople. In a flash, the audience stand was covered in fresh and boiling blood as the warriors slashed at the abdomens of their kin. Heads rolled one after another onto the platform, permanently seized in an expression of consternation and

disbelief. The accompanying sorrowful melody seemed to record and narrate this horrifying massacre.

It lasted only for a brief moment.

When he blinked his eyes again, the scene he had just witnessed disappeared without a trace. The 22 warriors were still lurching forward, albeit with much slower footsteps than before.

Their sluggishness could not be helped. Their clanspeople were supposed to be their greatest source of strength, support and spiritual sustenance. They lived and died for their clan and its quest for power, while their people cheered them on as heroes. Unfortunately, it was all messed up now. The cries and curses of their clanspeople made them feel highly uncertain of what had just happened, while even the other clans which supported them now glowered at the warriors as if they had done something unforgivable.

Warriors are never fazed no matter how powerful an enemy is, but they can't disregard rebukes from their own people.

Could this be the Osha princess' ability?

"But... how?" Although Thuram had seen mind control abilities before, such as that of Kabala of Sandstone Clan, he had never seen or heard of these abilities being used at a range exceeding ten footsteps! He touched the God's Stone of Retaliation that he wore on his neck and glanced at his new owner. Drow Silvermoon was visibly standing at a distance far greater than ten footsteps from

the audience stand. "Was it really her singing voice which compelled those people who didn't adorn a God's Stone to cry bitterly?"

He believed that the Cut Bone warriors probably held the same doubt.

And in a duel, doubts were fatal.

Everything happened in a split second.

The instant they slowed their footsteps, Andrea seized the initiative.

Without using the short bow she carried on her back, she flung an arrow at each of the four nearest enemy duelists.

Perhaps because they were affected by what was happening outside the platform, or because they lowered their guard as they saw that the opponent was not holding a bow, they took no responsive action. By the time they saw the arrows flying straight at them, it was too late to evade.

The handful of arrows traveled as powerfully as the hardest shots a bow could make!

Each arrow penetrated its target slightly below their right clavicle and wedged in their bones. This caused their dominant hands to lose all energy and become unable to wield weapons. The

four warriors thereby became entirely incapable of battle.

This created a gap in the encirclement.

The song which reverberated on the platform suddenly changed from sorrowful to passionate and high-pitched. Intense drum-beating sounds seemed to throb on every listener's heart and inspirited them.

Ashes' figure was like a black shadow, which once again attested to her inexplicable strength. She was visibly carrying a sledgehammer and a shield, yet her footsteps were so light that she seemed to be drifting. Her left hand was used for parrying while her right hand wielded her weapon. Nobody was able to guard against her strikes. Instead of smashing her opponents with powerful blows, she held the sledgehammer horizontally and dashed in all directions around the platform, and this way could subdue six or seven people in no time.

The numerically-superior Cut Bone warriors now found themselves in a dilemma.

If they attempted to continue flanking the Osha party from both sides, they would struggle to parry Andrea's arrows, and moreover would have to find a way to get around Ashes and mend the gap. Even if they held up their shields, the arrows, which seemed to have eyes on them, could still puncture their legs. The Magic Stone arrows which they could fire amidst their panic would barely even threaten the opponent, and when the God's Stones fell on the floor, Iron Axe, who served a defensive role, would simply step and crush these expensive playthings that were worth dozens of gold

royals each!

Yet, if they decided to abandon the encirclement, their numerical advantage would become useless.

"Everyone, close up to me!"

Perhaps seeing that their initial plan was no longer viable, one of the warriors gave a loud cry for the dozen or so standing men to gather together. At this point of the duel, it was clear to everyone that, despite Ashes' cocky proclamation at the start, not a single participant had died.

If she truly intended to kill them, none of them would be able to resist her hammer blows.

Every warrior was a precious asset of his clan. Thus Ashes' method garnered the respect of the onlooking clans, including the duelists of the Cut Bone clan themselves. While they were not afraid to sacrifice themselves for the purpose of the holy duel, it had to be a meaningful death, instead of simply perishing blindly. Mother Earth was not a bloodthirsty deity. Though she was fond of courage and strength, she would not wish to see needless deaths.

The warriors sheathed their weapons and lined up in a row. They each stretched both hands in front of them such that their intentions could not be clearer.

"Humph."

Ashes laughed easily and placed down her shield. Subsequently, she dashed directly towards them while raising up the sledgehammer horizontally.

The sledgehammer collided powerfully against the wall of men.

"Ow!"

"Don't fall back!"

"Hold on!"

Some shouts were heard from the audience stand, but neither clan's name was mentioned. It was as if at this stage, nobody cared who won or lost as long as they could witness a brave and magnificent contest. Those who were crying only a moment ago now clenched their fists and stared at the center of the platform. For some reason, Thuram did not feel that anything was strange - the drum beats continually grew more intense, as if calling for the audience to move forward courageously. Every listener was now in such a highly excited mood that they felt themselves to be a participant in the duel instead of an onlooker!

Ashes stretched her upper body into a long and slanted line and bent her legs, before she engaged in a physical standoff with the Cut Bone warriors. Her arm muscles formed a perfect arc, such that they were perhaps the best visual depiction of strength with beauty.

But of course, this was not a duel between one person and an entire clan.

Once Iron Axe, Andrea, and Drow joined in the scrimmage, the stalemate was broken.

The four of them slowly pushed their opponents towards the edge of the platform. Every step was greeted with shouts from the audience. Thuram could not resist joining in the clamor and waving of arms.

After a period of crescendo, the melody finally reached its climax.

The advancing footsteps became synchronized with the drum beats. At this point, the warriors had no energy left. The Osha quartet roared in chorus and pushed their opponents off the platform!

The music abruptly stopped as this happened. Yet, the stirring melody continued to reverberate non-stop in everyone's ears, and would not dissipate for a long time...

"The winner is the Osha clan!"

Chapter 763: The Female Lycanthrope

As Guelz Burnflame approached the training hall, he could hear a thumping noise from its interior. There seemed to be a rather intense activity going on, as if a heavy and blunt instrument was repeatedly hitting against a sandbag.

"Chief!"

The guard at the door lowered his head and bowed.

"Is that Lorgar practicing inside?" Guelz pointed towards the ajar gate.

"Yes, she came here early in the morning, and said not to disturb her."

"I'll have a look."

"But Chief..."

"What?" He cast a glance at the guard.

"Nothing, you may enter." The guard shuddered slightly.

"Seems like my daughter is becoming more and more dignified." Guelz did not feel the least bit disgruntled by the guard's obstruction and instead raised his eyebrows with interest. The way

things were going, the Raging Flare clan would have a new successor when he could no longer climb on to the Burning Stage.

He opened the door to a training hall which was assembled from thousands of leather pieces, hemp ropes and wooden poles. In Iron Sand City, only the Chief himself, who owned the largest Stone Castle around, could build an indoor training ground like this.

The hall was not paved with dirt or stone, but fine yellow sand instead. Thus, it felt like one was walking in the desert. The sand was fine and small but not soft, and many sharp objects were concealed in it. These were often broken teeth or weapon fragments left behind by the trainers. There was also a considerable amount of blood that seeped through, which therefore caused a portion of the sand to turn dark red.

Guelz' grandfather once said that if all of the yellow sand was dyed red, Wildflame would forever occupy the position of the strongest clan and remain peerless in the Southernmost Region. This was because he had considered that if the clan was ever defeated, they would have to vacate this Stone Castle, and as a result, the overhead leather tentage, as well as all of the yellow sand, would have to be brought away. Even if they could not rebuild a training hall like this, at least they would not need to dye the sand again when they retook the first position.

A row of metal bars was erected on one end of the training hall. His daughter was here barefooted, with her pants and sleeves rolled up. She repeatedly threw heavy punches at the hanging sandbags. Guelz had no doubt that if these punches were thrown on a person's body, the viscera would be split into pieces.

"Hmm, excited after seeing the Osha clan's performance?" He smiled at her.

Lorgar turned her body and performed an aerial kick at a rebounded sandbag. Her slender legs moved as quick as lightning and sent the sandbag, which was as tall as a person, flying. The hemp rope holding the sandbag was finally overwhelmed, and snapped halfway through the violent swaying. The sandbag spun through the air and fell heavily on the floor, causing the interior sand to spill out.

"Hoo..." She exhaled loudly, causing her bestialized hands to return to normal. "You don't have to tell everyone, Papa. You already know what I'm thinking."

"You admire that Divine Lady called Ashes, right?" Guelz laughed heartily. "After all, in one-to-one combat, it's hard to find you a suitable opponent from this city."

Lorgar puckered her mouth. "Unfortunately, they've just won the right to enter Iron Sand City, and there's unlikely to be another contest for some time. Even if we issue them a challenge invitation, they'll probably decline."

"Of course. As the newly-promoted clan, they'll have many trifles to sort out in order to gain a foothold in this city. Perhaps there'll be a new challenger during the next spring. Nobody would want to waste their energy at this time."

"And that's why I can only hang out with these sandbags for now." Lorgar sighed. "Did you come to see me just to say this?"

"You would rather hang out with these sandbags than talk to Papa?"

"Err... that's not the case." She shook her ears and lowered them as if to admit her mistake.

"Ahem, watch your expression." Guelz controlled the urge to stroke his daughter's soft and fluffy ears, and instead issued her a solemn reminder. No matter how cute she looked, it was not befitting of a future clan leader to reveal such an expression. She should remain serious at all times, because this was the only way that her subordinates would revere and obey her.

"Oh." Lorgar immediately straightened her ears and replied seriously.

Guelz gave a nod of satisfaction. Ever since his daughter had awakened as a Divine Lady, she increasingly enjoyed fighting, while her strength and ability consistently improved. From the Mojins' perspective, there was nothing wrong with these. However, as she grew older, the abilities gifted to her by the Three Gods were beginning to show signs of sequela. At first, Lorgar looked just like a regular person, except that she would transform into a large desert wolf when she used her abilities. After many fights, she mastered the technique of transforming a single limb, and thus had an assured means of controlling the God's Stone of Retaliation. As the effective range of the God's Stone was only two to three steps, she was able to bestialize her arm by keeping a

distance away from the stone. The force which her arm could then exert was too great for any normal person to resist.

She thereby became unbeatable in a duel. The clan's warrior contingent, which had suffered a severe loss of personnel through the process of defending the first position and was showing signs of instability, became rejuvenated and stronger than ever before when she joined. Nobody had dared to challenge Wildflame's position for five years now. But, after many years of practices and battles, a section of Lorgar's body had permanently become wolf-like, such as her pointy ears and a half-visible tail. These did not revert to normal even when she withdrew her abilities.

Therefore, at present, Lorgar was a half-human, half-wolf monster.

As could be imagined, she would never be able to live the life of a proper Divine Lady. No charming warrior would ever be attracted by her body and looks, while Lorgar herself was not fond of those who were too unqualified.

Perhaps only her dear father did not mind whether she was a human or a beast.

Thus, she set her heart upon becoming the chief of Wildflame. Only by standing in the position which everyone had to look up to could she silence the questions about her.

"What do you think about the holy duel?"

"It looked exhilarating, but in truth, it was just a trick by Osha's chief, Drow Silvermoon. Aside from Ashes, there was nothing impressive." Lorgar wagged her tail.

"I must say, this tactic was brilliant indeed. She used her ability to bring the audience into the duel while steering clear of the restrictions, and completely controlled the direction of the duel." Guelz remarked, stroking his beard. "Not one person died to determine the outcome of the duel. I'd never seen something like this for many years. I believe that when the Cut Bone clan looks back on what happened, they won't hate Osha for it."

"This type of trick can only be used once," Lorgar retorted disapprovingly. "I'm willing to bet that in upcoming duels, the audience will start to adorn God's Stone of Retaliation as well. Although Osha's methods may have won their opponent's respect, it may backfire one day. You can't fill your stomach with respect. Who knows, maybe their first challenger will be a resurgent Cut Bone clan after a short period of recovery."

Guelz patted his daughter's shoulders relievedly. That she was able to notice these things, and place the clan's interest at the top of her considerations, were signs that she had the makings of a chief. Although she was keen on a well-matched and entertaining contest, she would not deliberately look for such opportunities and thereby ignore threats to the clan.

Just then, the guard who was keeping watch outside the training hall walked hurriedly up to the duo. After saluting, he reported, "Chief, I've just heard the news that the Osha clan has issued another request for a holy duel!"

"What?" Guelz was taken back and his face changed color. It had, after all, only been a day since they gained entrance into Iron Sand City. "To who?"

"The fourth-placed Sandstorm clan."

"Aren't they moving into Iron Sand City from the small oasis?"

"No. I've even heard that they rejected Cut Bone clan's arrangements to move out."

Crazy, what are these people thinking? Was it not their intention to move into Iron Sand City?

"Looks like we were wrong." Lorgar had remained silent for some time before she laughed softly. "Perhaps, a duel with Ashes isn't as unlikely as I'd imagined. What do you think, Papa?"

Chapter 764: The Miracle Route

At night, the Skull Cup became the liveliest place in the small oasis.

"I watched the duel between Osha and Sandstorm with my own eyes!" A customer swilled down a jug of Firelantern Wine and exclaimed. "The black-haired Divine Lady was simply unstoppable! The instant the gong was rung, she charged straight up to the opposing Divine Lady and knocked her out with a single blow from her shield!"

"Isn't the Divine Lady from the Sandstorm clan called Sandra Sandrain? She can use sand to create armor and launch attacks. How did she lose so easily?" Another customer questioned. "Even if she couldn't respond in time, the sand armor she was wearing should be tougher than the Northerners' armor. How did it not block the attack?"

"You think I'm lying? I wasn't the only one who saw it!" The customer bawled disgruntledly. "The sand armor may be tough, but I didn't see it work at all. The moment that Osha's Divine Lady charged up to her, the sand covering her body splattered on to the floor, and her face took a full blow from the shield. Don't you remember that in the first duel, Osha's Divine Lady stood up to a dozen Cut Bone warriors on her own? With that kind of strength, it's only out of mercy that Sandra isn't dead!"

"Splattered on to the floor...? Was she wearing a God's Stone of Retaliation?"

"Maybe, but I'm not sure about that. The Cut Bone and Sandstorm duelists were certainly wearing them, however. Maybe these things don't work on her."

"A Divine Lady who isn't affected by God's Stones...? How's that possible?"

"Will you stop interrupting?" Someone whined. "Give this man some more liquor and let him finish speaking!"

"Thank you." The customer took a sip of his newly-filled jug and continued, "Sandstorm clan probably didn't expect their Divine Lady to fall first, and quickly lost their formation. They had only sent out half of the quota, and Sandra was surely their side's linchpin. Once she fell, there was virtually no chance of victory."

"Not one person died, again?"

"Indeed. All 15 of them are alive. They were either struck by arrows on their shoulders and knees, or were knocked out by Osha's Divine Lady!"

A flurry of whispers was heard amongst the crowd.

"But this is nothing." The customer suddenly became even more excited, and stood on to the bar counter so that everyone could see him. "The duel two days ago was the truly unforgettable one! Osha versus Black River, a large clan infamous for its audacity and cruelty! I'm sure everyone has heard its name before. Of the

duelists that fought against them, very few managed to survive! Though they don't have a Divine Lady, they are entirely made up of top-top-class warriors, and always send out a full strength of 30 people. Compared to the other two duels, a lot more blood was spilled this round, but..."

The entire tavern quietened down when they heard the word 'but'. Everyone was eager for the customer to complete his sentence.

"But... once again, not one person died on the platform!" The customer exclaimed.

Everyone in the crowd gasped.

"That's impossible! When I did some trading in Iron Sand City today, everyone was discussing the news of Black River clan's heavy losses. They even hung a black flag on the Stone Castle for mourning. And you claim that not one person died?"

"Ha, you really need to listen more carefully." The customer twitched his fingers. "I said that not one person died on the platform!"

"I can attest to that," someone swiftly chimed in, "I was also watching!"

"That's right. Although I wasn't in time for the second holy duel, I was able to make it the day before yesterday. The platform could

be said to be flowing with rivers of blood, hence it's extremely impressive that no one died!" Another person added.

"What exactly do you mean?"

"Please elaborate for everyone's sake."

"Miss, give him another three jugs!"

"It's easy to understand. The Divine Lady gave them a chance, but even when their limbs were broken or fractured, they tried using their teeth to bite her. Under this circumstance, she was forced to nullify their counterattacking ability completely....," The customer deliberately paused for a moment. "She used a long knife to sever their limbs before she kicked them off the platform one by one!"

"If just an arm or a leg was severed, they would have been able to survive after some treatment. But without all four limbs, they weren't able to hold on until they reached Iron Sand City. The blood loss alone killed them. Can you really blame Osha for this?" He gulped down a large mouthful of wine and repeated his question. "What do y'all think? Speak up!"

"Probably not... they hadn't done so in the previous duels, and were forced to do so this time."

"That nobody died on the platform is sufficient proof that the Divine Lady had no intention to kill."

"That's right!"

"In my opinion, Black River deserves it. They didn't even know who their opponent was, and thought that their usual appearance would intimidate Osha!"

"Well said!"

"Barkeeper, give everyone another jug of Firelantern Wine. It's all on me tonight!" Someone shouted towards the second floor of the tavern.

Thuram, who had all the time been leaning against the window on the second floor, clapped his hands and replied, "No need. This round is on me. To Osha..."

"To Osha!"

The first floor of the tavern burst out in cheers.

Thuram finished the drink in his hand and let out a long sigh.

In the past week, the number of customers to Skull Cup had been rising. The first floor, which had been considered spacious, became overcrowded instead. Everyone was busy discussing only one thing, and that was the holy duels.

In fact, it was not only the tavern but also the small oasis which became packed. Wherever he went, he would see moribunds and half-deads from various clans inquiring about news of Osha. This was something that could never have happened in the past.

An upsurge in population was a huge burden for the administrators of the small oasis. The granaries never had enough stock to begin with, and furthermore, it was easy for people who came with bad intentions to blend into the crowds. According to the watchdogs' usual practice, the small oasis only allowed in Ironsand people who were able to bring benefits to the place - they had to be either merchants or warriors who sought refuge.

That the clanspeople from all corners of the Silver Stream Oasis were now free to gather here was entirely because of the orders of the new owner, Drow Silvermoon.

If he was the Thuram of old, his daily work would simply be intended to earn a few gold royals for the watchdogs, and at the same time set aside some money for himself. The transformation was more than he could ask for. At present, his fate was firmly interlocked with that of the Osha clan. It was exhausting enough to make sure that his men maintained order in the small oasis.

Fortunately, the new owner had already considered his circumstance. After the first duel, Drow allowed him to remain in the small oasis and focus on the domestic situation.

To ensure an adequate food supply, Iron Axe not only brought back a batch of food from the Cut Bone clan, but also offered gold royals to two other oases. When one of them rejected the deal, they

were raided and seized by Graycastle soldiers the very next day, and their territory was exchanged for food from the food-abundant Silver River clan.

In reality, by this point in time, Thuram did not have the faintest idea what the Osha people's intentions were.

They not only accepted the challenge of a clan which had been previously unharmed, but also spared the warriors of Cut Bone and Sandstorm clan, allowing them to recover their full strength after a short rest. Even if they desired to be the top clan, doing so seemed completely meaningless!

The one thing that comforted Thuram was that the Divine Ladies brought back by Drow Silvermoon were indeed extremely powerful. The party always consisted of only four people, yet they had already beaten three large clans in succession. There were, at present, only two clans to go.

And tonight, there should be news from the Land of Fire once more.

The outcome of Osha's challenge against the Wildwave clan.

Chapter 765: The Last Battle

At midnight, a messenger came running to the tavern, panting.

"We won.....we won!" He said with a husky voice, without even drinking a drop of water, "Sir, the Osha clan has won!"

To return from the Land of Fire to the small oasis on foot it required a day, and if one could arrive on the same day if traveling by horse. It was obvious that once the fight was over he had immediately rushed back to the oasis.

The whole "Skull Cup" shook with the news.

"Ha, I knew they could win!"

"What was the course of events?"

"Tell us, how did they win?"

"No casualties as always?"

Talking and asking, everyone surrounded the messenger while at the same time the best fruit wine was delivered in front of him.

Thuram also felt relieved. After all, the stronger Osha was, the better life he would have as a member of the clan. He did not care much about the fact that it was not him who had led the clan to

score such a victory in the fight. As long as he could make his clan members shed the half-dead and dead status, he would always believe that he had made a good bargain with Graycastle.

He clapped towards that clan member. "Take a breath first and then tell us the details of the fight."

"Yes!" The messenger satisfied his thirst with some fruit win, took a deep breath and said, "The two sides didn't fight as the Wildwave clan reached an agreement with the Osha princess and willingly gave up the second seat!"

"What?"

Everyone in the tavern remained quiet for a while and then suddenly all of them started talking so loud that the roof seemed to shake!

"The two sides didn't fight?"

"Willingly giving up...does this count as surrender?"

"Doesn't this mean that Osha is one step away from becoming the chief clan?"

"Winning a series of four holy duels while not killing anyone. This has never happened before!"

"I also heard of this so I came as fast as I could."

"Haha, me too. If it wasn't for this, who would want to leave the Silver Stream Oasis during the cold winter.

"Damn, it was worth coming here!"

"To the Three Gods from Osha!"

"To Lady Drow Silvermoon!"

Thulam was also stunned for a moment. But not because of Wildwave clan's surrender—this kind of action was understandable. Saving their strength by keeping temporarily the third seat, waiting for Osha and Wildflame to both weaken through their battle and then finding the opportunity to regain second place, or maybe even becoming the chief clan. After all, they could afford to retreat, unlike Wildflame.

What surprised him was that he had suddenly come to realize, during all the chatting, what was his new master's purpose.

They were quickly gaining popularity!

There has never been a holy duel before that attracted as much of Sand people's attention as this one—the vengeful return of the Osha princess, the continuous challenges just like a mighty storm, no matter how many the enemies were... always fighting with four people, plus the extraordinary record of not killing anyone. All of

these, as unbelievable as they may sound, greatly attracted people's curiosity.

Even though the holy duel was an important ritual in deciding each clan's position and power, but for many of the Sand Nation's people, that was very far from them. Some clans, from their establishment until their disappearance, would never leave the Silver Stream Oasis and so naturally would not care about the challengers and the fights between the clans.

After all, being able to stand out from a myriad of clans was so rare that the news of a normal alternation of power was not even as attractive as the news of the Osha being framed by the Ironwhip. But it was different this time. A clan member who had been subjected to exile and the daughter of a chief who was sold as a slave still had the opportunity to turn things around. Just by considering this, most of the weak clans had unconsciously taken the side of the Osha. But the things that happened afterward were even more bizarre and thus in just one month, Osha had turned from an unknown challenger into the center of Sand people's discussions.

The full of people tavern was the best proof.

No matter if they were full of expectation or sarcasm, or if they were just curious to see how far could Osha go, at least Drow Silvermoon had now become a household name. It was not hard to imagine that at the time of the last holy duel, numerous people would go to the Land of Fire to personally watch Osha's battle to ascend to the top.

Thuram naturally understood the meaning of such a reputation.

The last clan chief whose name spread throughout the entire Southernmost Region had almost unified the whole desert, and even though later he had fallen in the war with Graycastle, he was widely considered as the Three Gods Emissary.

Did the new master also had this goal in mind?

The only difference this time was that the Osha did not need to oppose Graycastle— the power supporting them was actually the northern kingdom which was suppressing the Sand Nation.

"His Majesty Roland Wimbledon will bring order and oasis to the Mojin Clan."

Thinking of Iron Axe's words, he suddenly realized that once Osha really became the chief clan, maybe something great would happen.

That would probably change the fate of all Ironsand people of the Mojin Clan.

Two days later, outside of the small oasis, at the camp of the First Army.

"Your injury... is it ok?" Echo looked at Ashes worryingly. The battle with the Black River clan had stained her whole body with blood—even though most of it was her opponent's, she still didn't come out unscathed.

"Don't worry, it won't affect our plan." Ashes carelessly untied her dark hair letting it fall on her loose cope. At times like that, it was impossible to see that she was an experienced fighter, but more of a graceful beauty. "Leaf's herbs are also very effective, the deeper cuts are almost healed."

"They are only a few exterior injuries, Extraordinary witches are physically better than us. After all, all of the nutrition goes to the muscles instead of the brain." Andrea shrugged. "When she was fighting alone against the church, she was hiding in places that even mice were not willing to stay, surviving on dead animals. If that didn't kill her then don't even mention these small injuries."

Ashes rolled her eyes but instead of arguing with her like usual, she leaned on the chair and closed her eyes.

"This is how a veteran should act," Iron Axe next to her thought, "apart from eating and fighting, the rest of the time should be used for resting, in order to restore both physical and mental health. The other witches of Neverwinter may also be strong but not many of them would be able to do that."

This is why His Majesty had delayed his plan only to wait for her.

"What're we going to do next?" Echo asked.

"We have done our best according to His Majesty's instructions." Iron Ax recalled Roland's instructions before their departure. Although some words were very hard to understand, like the making hype being the most important thing, by creating a topic, a legendary duel, so that the whole desert could hear their voice and so on...but in overall, the plan was to draw as much public attention as possible. Nowadays, more and more people were coming to watch the holy duel from various locations of the Silver Stream Oasis, so their plan was successful. "All that is left is to defeat Wildflame, and then, at the holy land, in the presence of everyone, you tell them what His Majesty has instructed you.

"I...Understood," Echo remained silent for a while and then clenched her fist as if motivating herself.

"Don't worry, lady Silvermoon, His Majesty didn't require everyone to understand this, you don't need to feel too much pressure." Iron Axe said. "You only need to do as usual and let your voice be heard everywhere in the Land of Fire. No matter how many people respond to us, the new order will spread in the whole Southernmost Region down the Silver Stream.

Suddenly, Thuram entered the room.

He saluted the four of them and took out a letter. "The Raging Flare clan responded to Osha's challenge request, but...they require specific people to participate in the battle.

"What do you mean?" Andrea frowned.

"It says in the letter that Princess Lorgar of the Wildflame clan wishes to have a one on one fight with Ashes on the Burning Stage," Thuram replied respectfully.

Chapter 766: Ashes Against Lorgar!

The holy duel between Osha clan and Raging Flare clan was about to begin as planned.

The Land of Fire had never been as lively as it was today, with the spectators almost surrounding the high platform—in order to ensure that more people enter the holy land, Iron Axe also released on loan a box of God's Stone of Retaliation. As long as one clan had no more than 50 people, the rest of the clans would not say anything.

Even if they wanted to, they wouldn't be able to stop them.

Osha nowadays was already the popular second strongest clan. As long as they did not oppose the Three Gods, anything they required had to be taken into careful consideration.

Under the cheerings of the crowd, Ashes slowly walked on the platform—the Ironsand people of the Mojin Clan were full of respect for real fighters and her performance the past month had earned her everyone's respect.

Some were even calling her the strongest fighter in the Northern kingdom.

Thus, this fight was regarded as the battle between the strongest of the Northern kingdom and the strongest of the Southernmost Region.

Ashes was still dressed like usual, her long hair tied into a ponytail and hanging down her waist. She was wearing a black robe without any armor and not carrying any weapons.

But it wasn't because she was arrogant.

The Raging Flare clan's request for an "unarmed fight" meant according to Thuram, a fight without any weapons, armor or other supporting items including God's Stones of Retaliation. Obviously, banning God's Stones would help Lorgar to some degree, since it would inadvertently weaken the Extraordinary's combat strength. Ashes believed that it was a coincidence, because in the past month, she had found out that they were not aware of the categorization of witch's powers. As long as one had awakened, she was regarded as a Divine lady, but they did not know of the most special type of witch: the Extraordinaries.

The opponent probably just wanted a good fight.

She ultimately agreed to this request, after taking into account that the ability of Princess Lorgar of the Wildflame clan still belonged to the melee type—this information had not only been confirmed by Thuram's description but also from many other sources. The Divine lady Lorgar's ability was almost similar to that of Maggie's, as she could turn into a monster while obtaining strength and agility far beyond that of ordinary people. This made her extremely excited. Who would be stronger, a transformed witch or an Extraordinary?

If it was an opponent like Anna, Ashes would have never accepted.

The unpredictable Blackfire could both defend and attack so there was no way to fight against it. Without the protection of God's Stone, it would almost be impossible to get closer than ten meters.

On the other hand, an equal combat would also be beneficial for her.

Since she found out about the Transcendent, Ashes were always thinking of improving her ability.

According to Agatha, becoming a Transcendent required everyday practice as well as continuously battling with strong opponents. This way, through life and death situations, one could achieve high evolution.

This was the main reason that led her to accept the opponent's request.

At that moment, a sudden cheer burst from the crowd as a woman wearing a hooded cloak swiftly jumped on the platform, heading towards Ashes. Being the strongest of them, the Sand people's cheering for her was slightly louder. There was no doubt that she was the opponent she had to face today—the Raging Flare clan's Divine lady, Lorgar.

"You are Ashes?" she took off her hood and revealed her red curly hair as well as...a pair of tall fluffy ears.

Ashes was stunned, "Are these..dog ears?"

"Wolf ears!" Lorgar corrected her and her face instantly became red.

"Oh, you aren't wearing shoes? Isn't the ground too hot?" She gazed down at her bare feet.

"Mojins are never afraid of the hot sand," She tiptoed while taking off her cloak, exposing also a fluffy tail behind her.

Judging by her expression, it was obvious that it was hot...Ashes shrugged, "You are getting used to the consumption of magic power by always maintaining your transformation? It seems like a good way to practice."

"I don't understand what are you saying," Lorgar waved her tail. "This is the price for this ability given by the Three Gods, it's not some kind of practice—I have no way to transform back to human form so I can only live on as half human and half beast."

So that was the case, Ashes realized. Because she did not want to expose her appearance, she had to wear a cloak even such a hot place... and revealing her animalized form once she was already on stage would make everyone think that she had transformed because she had entered the battle.

So what the intelligence referred to as a monster, was actually a wolf?

She wasn't sure whether it would be effective or not to decrease Lorgar's fighting capacity by using a bone to allure her and distract her.

At least for Maggie, that would be extremely effective.

"What are laughing at?" Lorgar frowned. "Are you underestimating me?"

"No, nothing," Ashes suppressed her smile, "I just remembered a funny friend...since you are ready, let's begin."

"My thoughts exactly." Lorgar raised both of her hands and the once smooth female arms transformed into a pair of thick wolf claws. "Father, please knock the gong!"

Is this...partial animalization through free will? Ashes raised her eyebrows. Even though she was ignorant of the mysteries of magic power, she was still able to control and utilize her power properly. This was hard even for Maggie and only in dangerous situations were she able to do it.

As the chief of Wildflame hit the gong with intense, Lorgar pushed with both feet and lunged towards her.

The Wolf girl's speed was pretty fast but in the eyes of Ashes, it still wasn't that different from ordinary people's. She could even determine where the opponent's landing position would be and thus prepare her own attacking position in advance.

But she didn't do it.

Lorgar was obviously not using her full power but instead was planning to test her strength through such a move. So, Ashes decided to oppose her head on in order to make her realize that she had no chance to defeat her unless she completely transformed first.

She held out her hands and firmly grabbed Wolf girl's paws like a pincer. Then she turned her body and, using her opponent's momentum, she held her above her shoulders and smashed her forcefully on the ground.

This was the advantage of an Extraordinary. Partial animalization meant only partially strengthened power for Lorgar, but as for Ashes, each of her fingers, each of her tendons were strengthened at all times. Magic power would strengthen her body every day, continuously and no matter the time she would always feel her body surging with power.

She punched downwards, smashing the ground where Lorgar was lying. As for the latter, she had rolled over to dodge her and then put her hands upside down, bent her knees and kicked towards her.

But the kick that would have caused a viscera rupture on any adult was single-handedly grabbed by Ashes, who instantly squeezed it peeling off the skin of Lorgar's calf, almost breaking it. At that moment, Wolf Girl realized the danger through her pain, kicked towards Ashes' head with her other foot while simultaneously transforming her foot into a wolf leg!

Ashes loosened her five fingers and bent to escape the sweeping strike. Lorgar finally escaped and did not dare to keep on testing so she transformed her other leg into a wolf leg too—as a result, all four of her limbs had been completely animalized, which not only increased her height quite a bit but also improved her speed and strength.

As far as Ashes was concerned, her opponent's situation did not improve that much though. Any parts of her body that had not been animalized were obviously her weak spots.

For example the head and the abdomen.

The Extraordinary fiercely punched with two fists, forcing Lorgar to also use both of her paws to stop her. Then, she smirked and before the Wolf Girl could realize what happened, she forcefully hit the other's forehead with her own.

"Woo—"

Princess Lorgar couldn't help but utter a painful cry, with tears and blood coming out simultaneously. The huge impact had crashed her nose and she was forced by the the intense pain to

close her eyes.

Ashes turned around, kicked Lorgar's soft abdomen and sent her flying!

Chapter 767: Extraordinary Training Method

The noisy field quietened down suddenly.

No one could have expected that Lorgar would have fallen into a disadvantage so soon after the fighting began. From the looks of this round, Princess Lorgar of the Wildflame clan was definitely wounded heavily.

Only Ashes knew that she had not used her full power in that attack. At that moment she struck Wolf Girl, the other party had already speedily retreated backward and had slightly curled her body. Therefore the attack was not taken at a full blow. In the face of a heavy blow, Lorgar consciously avoided being in the scope of the enemy's attack. This indicated that even if she had not experienced the real battle of life and death, at least she had put in a lot of efforts in training.

The girl fell to the ground and rolled around for two laps. Her body rapidly started to inflate, causing the clothes on her body to get torn to shreds. Her smooth skin exposed was covered by the fluffy light yellow mane.

"Um... she looks different from Maggie." Ashes pondered. "Fat Pigeon wraps herself up with hair and then transforms into a bird species, so this could be considered a purely physical change. No wonder she chooses to fight barefoot before, as she knows that every time she animalizes into a beast, she'll ruin a pair of shoes. That will be a heavy burden even for a big clan."

By contrast, Maggie was much more economical. Not only would she not damage her clothes, but she could also wrap her package in her hair and most of the time that meant she could carry an extra luggage.

"Ow ow ow woo—!"

When Lorgar stopped rolling, her body had completely changed its appearance.

A huge desert wolf appeared on the platform. Ashes had seen these wolves with yellow fur on her way to and from the Land of Fire. Compared to the snow wolves at Western Region, their fur was not only stubby and hard, but they were also thinner in shape. After sunset, their eyes would occasionally emit a green light, and they constantly had an insatiable look. Obviously, they led different lives from their same kind in the Misty Forest. Other than the lack of rich rations, they also faced the threat of other brutal predators.

But this wolf in front of her was way too large.

Even a horse would be dwarfed beside her. Just her limbs alone were already half a head higher than Ashes. If Lorgar stood on her hind legs, that would be the height of two adult men.

And her severely damaged nose was also reflected in the animalized body. The cocked bridge of her nose had a collapsed part, and the nostrils also blew out hot air and streaks of fresh

blood.

Lorgar howled loudly and caused the onlookers at Sand Nation to gasp in astonishment. Not only Ashes, but it was the first time for everyone around to witness the changing process of the strongest goddess in the Southernmost Region. It was natural for them to feel great pressure and fear standing under such a burly body.

Without waiting for their inhaling sounds to subside, Wolf Girl sprang forward toward Ashes again.

This time Ashes looked more serious, as the latter's speed had almost reached the level of the God's Punishment Warriors. And with such a huge figure, its power certainly could not be underestimated.

She avoided Lorgar's thrust by moving aside and immediately realized that she had made the wrong move.

Wolf Girl's range after animalizing was too wide. Compared with the God's Punishment Army warrior that had the same size as common people, she often only needed to move one step to dodge the attack. And with two or three steps she could even counterattack. But for the giant beast, the number of steps needed to be increased at least several times.

Right now, Ashes barely avoided the attack, before the other party struck with her right claw and hit her like a huge wall.

"Boom—!"

Being unable to avoid the attack, she had no choice but to lift her arms to block the attack head-on.

Although the collision gave both sides exactly the same impact, the advantages of body shape at this moment were very clear. Lorgar's whole body trembled due to the impact, while Ashes was completely thrown out flying.

...

Under the platform, Echo could not help grabbing Andrea's wrist. "Ashes... Will she be alright?"

After animalizing into a huge beast, the situation was reversed. Princess Lorgar of the Wildflame clan kept pursuing Ashes, and the latter could only use most of her energy to defend and dodge with almost no way of fighting back.

Although both were unarmed, each of their kicks and punches was as sharp as an iron hammer at this level. Several wounds appeared on Ashes's body, and the blood gradually dyed her robes red.

"Don't worry, an attack like this won't cost her her life. She still hasn't given all her force." Andrea continued and said, "Ashes may not have many strengths, but she is exceptional at resisting attacks."

"Not yet given her... all?" Echo was startled and said, "But she's obviously panting, and she doesn't look at all relaxed!"

"Do you know the Extraordinary Training Method during the Taquila age?" Andrea asked in return.

"No, what's that?"

"It's a way to speed up the consumption of magic power so that one can be in training mode all the time... According to His Majesty Roland, this was both ancient and inefficient, hence it would be better to study two more books to analyze how muscles and bones can convert chemical energy into mechanical energy." She chuckled and said, "But I think for someone with the intelligence of Ashes, she might be particularly suitable for this stupid method—after all, letting her read a book was simply too difficult."

"Is that so?" Echo widened her mouth in surprise.

"Of course," said Andrea gracefully while she smoothened the ends of her hair. "Look, she's going to fight back."

...

As soon as Ashes managed to distance herself from her opponent, she pulled out a black tape from within her arms.

"What's that?" said Lorgar, who stopped in her tracks and shouted, "is that a weapon?"

The crowd was also stirred up.

The agreement of the holy duel was sanctioned by the Three Gods and deserters would be eternally spurned. So no one violated this even if it was not checked by anyone.

Ashes smiled and casually threw the cloth strap on the ground. It looked like a waist strap, but it made a dull crash when it fell on the ground as if she had thrown a heavy stone, instead of a gentle piece of cloth.

Wolf Girl's howlings suddenly contracted.

However, this was not the only burden.

Then she crouched down and took the two pieces of black tape that were tied to her ankles.

They looked ordinary but were handmade by Soraya. If they were ordinary fabrics, even the most sturdy canvas would not last more than a week. The cloth strap was divided into three layers. The innermost one was hollow, and filled with special iron bars. Each short part weighed about ten pounds. The cloth strap for the waist would be equivalent to the weight of carrying an adult person.

When she stood up again, she felt her whole body full of strength again and the long-lost sense of ease once again returned to her body.

"Extraordinaries wear this kind of thing to practice. The faster the magic is consumed, the stronger the body gets." Ashes still remembered what Agatha said at that time. "Even many people bring them to the battlefield, and at the most crucial moment, the most unexpected power could be released. If all went well and you persisted for five to six years, you could even hope to break through the body's shackles and become a Transcendent."

And now, just over a year and three months have passed.

Chapter 768: Bloodbathed Battle

This was the first time Ashes initiated the attack since Princess Lorgar of the Wildflame clan had completely animalized.

Lorgar also did not back down and lifted her body toward her opponent. But this time she found that her attacks could no longer be coherent, and even with a wide range of Sweeping Strike, it was difficult to force the other party to block or counterattack. She was always a little slower than Ashes. She could hit Ashes before, but now she could only tear off a corner of her clothing.

And more often than not, she could not reach anything.

After fighting for a moment, Wolf Girl had to use a strong tactic. When her right claw was unsuccessful, she had to use the remainder of her strength to rotate her body, and use her stout tail to hit the other party—this tactic allowed her to instantly place half of the platform within her attacking range. Even if Ashes were quick on her feet it would be impossible to retreat completely, unless she had no intention from the start to approach. A tail like an iron whip could easily scrape off fresh flesh, and most of the wounds on Ashes were left behind by this move.

However, the expected crash did not come.

Sounds of exclamation could be heard coming from the platform.

Oh no!

Lorgar's heart suddenly had a bad premonition and at the same time, she saw a fallen figure from the corner of her eye.

She—can fly?

All the bystanders were staring with their eyes wide open. They saw Ashes levitating even over the top of Wolf Girl who was half a head taller than her, and she landed directly on the turning head of her opponent!

Tail attacks had a wide range, yet could only sweep close to the ground raid without being a threat to mid-air targets. However, it would be extremely difficult for most people to jump over such a great distance. As it would be easy for opponents to judge the landing point leading to the inevitable next attack, so few people would jump into a duel.

Unfortunately, after Wolf Girl rotated her body to do a sweeping strike, her tail part became her blind zone.

Ashes no longer chose to show mercy, but smashed her fist into Lorgar's eye, causing the eyeballs to split open suddenly. A mass of blood splashed over half of her body, and severe pain caused the latter to scream out hoarsely. Even if the body could bear the attack, the organs such as the eyes were still very fragile parts. After losing one eye, the duel had quickly tilted its balance in favor toward the Extraordinary.

However, just as Ashes intended to withdraw her fist and give her

opponent a chance to surrender, she found that Lorgar's eye was closed and her right hand was gripped tightly by her eyelids and face muscles. In the meantime, a giant claw came flashing toward Ashes—even if this claw managed to wound her, it would also increase the trauma of Wolf Girl's eye.

Lorgar showed that she was determined to fight.

Normally, imprisonment like this would be unable to trap the Extraordinary witch, but just slow down her actions by a little. But at such a critical moment, even a breath of time could be extremely deadly.

Ashes knew very well that she could not avoid it, so she did not hesitate and lifted the other arm to face the attack head-on.

She seemed to have heard the sound of her broken bones caused by the tremendous impact.

She sprayed out a mouthful of fresh blood.

This was probably the first time after the duel started that she was really hit.

As the two separated, Ashes noticed that her left arm had been bent into a weird shape.

"Roar——!"

Lorgar roared loudly and rushed towards Ashes with her mouth wide open, ready to bite.

Instead of retreating, Ashes rolled forward. She escaped the other party's bite and crawled under the blind zone of Wolf Girl's neck. Then with one hand holding the ground, she kicked both legs to the other's forelimb.

With a loud noise, the forelimb bent out like a folding door. And at this point, the three-legged Wolf Girl almost lost her ability to attack.

"Lorgar, that's enough!" The head of Wildflame Guelz shouted.

"No, I can still fight!" Lorgar replied breathlessly. "Her situation isn't much better. I just need to hold on for a while... hold on for a while and it'll be alright!"

Ashes licked the bloodstains from the corner of her mouth, and could not help but laugh.

Her opponent was right as her situation was indeed not too good. The heavy blow caused her whole body to ache and her internal organs felt like they had shifted positions; her arm was also broken and drooping weakly beside her. She looked as pathetic as the one-eyed giant wolf that was standing with three legs.

However, a man could move by two legs, but a wolf could not.

Coupled with the loss of one eye, the limited vision would further hinder Wolf Girl's action. If she could not accurately hit the enemy, then being strong and powerful would be meaningless. This was what she had learned from her experience of fighting with the God's Punishment Warriors.

The other thing that could be confirmed was that she was now a lot stronger than she was a year ago.

This was particularly obvious when she received that great impact. Ashes could clearly feel the magic power in her body flow faster than ever before, and time seemed to slow down in that instant. She could even see the claws and meat pad that kept coming close toward her. And most of the magic gathered in her forearm, so she had an unprecedented strength.

If it were her in the past, this strike would not only have broken that arm that was used as a shield, but would have also cracked her ribs and internal organs.

But for now, she just felt pain and not numbness nor weakness.

Was this what Agatha meant by the life and death sentiment?

She felt as if she was standing in front of a thick door.

If Wolf Girl could partially control her magic power to partly animalize her own body, could the Extraordinary apply the same method each time to attack with a strength beyond the limits of

her own power?

This may be a worthwhile exercise.

Of course, the most important thing now is to resolve this duel.

If I break even the other eye, she will have no choice but to admit defeat, right?

Anyway, with the help of Leaf's herbs, she could stay alive. As long as she could be towed back to the Western Region, Nana would be able to heal her back to brand new.

Ashes took a deep breath and bent down slightly.

Lorgar also got ready for an attacking stance and exposed her fangs at the same time.

Both of them knew that the next blow would be the final blow for both parties, no matter what the outcome was. Only one person would be standing on the platform.

The heavy atmosphere infected all the spectators and the entire scene was silent, leaving only the sound of the burning ground.

Just as Ashes was about to move, there was a sudden scream from Echo. "Be careful, overhead!"

She rapidly looked up and saw a huge monster rushing down that had expanded wings even wider than the platform. Its claws were like open blades, and as thick as an arm. Only when it got close to the ground, could she hear the hiss of the air stream passing over its wings.

Ashes jumped aside with her greatest strength to avoid the monster's diving attack range.

And through the corner of her eye, she saw that Lorgar was also trying to dodge its attack. But because of her broken forelimbs, she was unable to and got hit directly by the enemy.

With a boom, the platform was smashed into several cracks by this meteoroid-like impact.

Lorgar cried out piercing screams.

Chapter 769: Unyielding Will

"By the name of Three Gods! That's... the Four-winged Eagle!"

"How dare this beast break into the Burning Shrine!"

"Help, help me!"

"Guards, where are the guards?"

Screams of panic and disbelief came from the crowd. Some of the Sand Nation people pulled out their weapons and climbed up the platform to save Lorgar, while the others wanted to flee. The scene suddenly became quite chaotic.

Ashes could see clearly through the smoke that the bird was actually a giant demonic beast. It resembled a demonic hybrid of an eagle and a beetle. The back, lower abdomen, and head were covered with a striped shell. It had six claws and each section could be clearly seen. The front pair was the thickest and held Lorgar firmly on the ground like an iron clamp. The four pairs of wings, which should have been as thin as cicada wings were thick like bird wings and became its most striking feature.

Nature could never produce such an ugly monster.

The demonic beast kept trying to peck her neck while pressing down Wolf Girl. Its claws could not be avoided, and Wolf Girl could only sway from left to right to avoid the attack. The inability

to move her body greatly limited the range that she could dodge. In a short time, her cheek already suffered a few scratches, and the fresh blood stained her fur. By the look of things, she would not be able to hold for a long time and would be killed by the demonic beast.

Ashes would definitely not allow it to happen.

Ashes assisted Iron Axe in participating in the Desert Mission because of Tilly; using the holy duel to decide victory was also the choice of the latter. She had the aid of Leaf's herbs and Nana's treatment, so she took this matter very seriously in order not to let Lorgar down. However, Lorgar was still a witch, and so long as she was not evil like a Pure Witch, there was no way Ashes could sit by idly and let her die in the hands of the demonic beast.

"Echo!"

Ashes shouted, and then plunged toward the demonic hybrid. She clung to its mouth at that moment when it was trying to peck again.

The sharp corner of its mouth scratched her arm and the blood dripped bit by bit on Wolf Girl's face, but she was still motionless.

Wolf Girl looked up at Ashes weakly with her remaining eye. Her dark pupil revealed a complex look.

At the same time, Echo's lullaby could be heard. The music

gradually dispersed everyone's panic and soothed the crowd that was trying to escape.

Without the interference from the surrounding crowd, repeated gunfire sounds could be heard from where Andrea was standing.

She was different from the First Army that might accidentally wound the witch. Her precise shooting ability ensured that as long as there was a glimmer of space, she could hit the target perfectly.

Ashes saw Lorgar's claws tremble fiercely. Then several rounds of bullets hit the same joint position, breaking the Four-winged Eagle's claws directly into two pieces.

After losing the clamp, Lorgar rolled up and kicked the beast's belly, and kicked it out. The latter flapped its wings and rose again. Only now did the First Army squad ring out the gunshots for the very first time. Unfortunately, it was not so easy to hit a flying target that could circle or swing up and down and was behaving more like an erratic insect than a bird.

"Are you ok?" Ashes took off her black robe and covered the diminishing body of the huge wolf.

"Temporarily... Ahem, I won't die yet..." Lorgar that had regained her human form, coughed out a mouthful of blood foam, and struggled to climb up but failed several times.

"Don't move around or else you will aggravate your wounds."

Ashes groped along her body and discovered that one side of the chest was sunken down and she could feel the bumps of the raised bones. It was clear that several ribs were broken in the previous violent impact. It was fortunate that the wolf form could resist the impact of the heavy attacks. If she had retained her human form, that attack would have probably taken her life.

Wildflame clan warriors also surrounded the area with their short bows and aimed toward the demonic beast in the sky. But even firearms could not be effective at this distance, therefore arrows were even more useless.

"Watch out! It's coming again!" Echo warned everyone again.

"Everyone get out of the way!"

Ashes hugged Lorgar and rolled on the spot to avoid the grazing attack of the demonic beast. Several clan warriors were unable to avoid it and were thrown out with their chests heavily deflated, so they were unlikely to survive.

The Four-winged Eagle obviously had a high level of intelligence. It seemed to realize that the only thing that could threaten it was the rifle held by Andrea. When it was diving and attacking Lorgar, it would always use its abdomen's shell to face the blonde witch. It also followed a rocking motion and a polyline flight path. When Andrea was refilling, the demonic beast would throw the people it captured toward Hummingbird and Echo to obstruct her filling action and also rotate the direction of attack.

Andrea avoided the danger several times by a thin thread. In addition to paying attention to the movements of the demonic beast, she also had to take care of the other two partners. If she had not mastered the new evolutionary skills that enabled her to release a strong air stream at close range, she would have been thrown down ages ago by the demonic beast.

Ashes could not help frowning as this Four-winged Eagle seemed like it was targeting the witches.

If it simply wanted to prey on food, the platform was full of people, and no one would have stopped it from taking away one or two people. But it dived repeatedly to attack Lorgar or would stare at Andrea and the other witches. It showed no interest in the ordinary people and was vastly different from the rumored brutal and bloodthirsty assailant.

The First Army had only 50 soldiers that entered the Land of Fire and were no help in dealing with a flexible target in the air. Ashes thought it was necessary to lead it to the top of the large army and hopefully, it could be shot down with more intense gunfire.

But... what exactly needed to be done?

At this moment, Lorgar grabbed her hand.

"Throw me upwards." Wolf Girl gasped and spoke one word at a time.

"What?"

"Ahem... Throw me up!" She repeated. "When it's coming toward us, that's the only... the only chance I can catch it. I can't act on my own, I can only depend on you!"

"If you don't succeed, you may die here," said Ashes.

"A warrior's second home has always been the battlefield," said Lorgar, with her ears drooping down. "So at least I've resisted until the very end. You are the most powerful warrior I've ever met... Ahem... You've given me the chance to experience such a wonderful fight. Thank you."

Ashes saw a firm resolve from her expression and nodded after a moment of silence, "I see. But you're mistaken, it's not our last fight."

"Even if I... manage to stay alive, it will be impossible for me to stand like a normal person. You don't need to comfort me." She laughed at herself.

Even if she could recover from such heavy wounds, she would still be disabled. Perhaps death would be a better option for her.

"There's a witch called Nana in Neverwinter of Graycastle, who can heal any man back to brand new. Even someone who's breathing his last or whose limbs are entirely broken," said Ashes, slightly widening her mouth.

The wolf's ears became erect in the blink of an eye.

"What you just said... is that true?"

"Of course, I have gone through no less than a hundred battles like this one, and there were even more powerful enemies. And if you want to hone your skills, you can find opportunities at any time. So if you live..." Ashes stopped here without finishing what she wanted to say, as she realized that the other party's remaining eye now reflected a brand new light.

"I'll survive, for sure."

"Well, come up then."

Ashes no longer hesitated and grabbed Lorgar's foot with one hand. She took advantage of Four-winged Eagle diving toward the center of the platform, to fling herself around for two turns before throwing Lorgar out—

Princess Lorgar of the Wildflame clan was like a flying arrow with her black robes, aiming at the monster that was flying straight down.

Chapter 770: Echo and Drow Silvermoon

"Siyaaaaa!"

The Four-winged Eagle let out a peculiar high-pitched sound as it probably did not expect the other party to take the initiative in attacking it.

It opened its beak and without a moment to spare, immediately attacked Lorgar without bothering to dodge.

What happened next shook the hearts of the onlookers.

Lorgar instantly transformed into a massive Desert Wolf and smacked the strange bird's face with thunderous strength! The eagle's head bent to one side and its beak that was originally able to pick up an adult with ease suddenly broke away.

It was then already too late for the demonic hybrid to adjust its balance, so the two beasts just fiercely collided with each other.

Lorgar once again spits out fresh blood, but she still tightly grabbed on to the demonic beast, and her teeth sank deeply into its flesh.

The demonic beast sensed danger from the Desert Wolf clinging on to her and desperately flapped its wings trying to fly up. However, no matter how hard it moved its wings, it was unable to gain altitude due to the Wolf Girl who weighed as heavy as itself.

"Andrea!" Ashes shouted at her companion.

"I knew that you would have to depend on me eventually," said Andrea. She threw her rifle back to Echo and leaped up the platform while summoning the Magical Longbow.

At the same time, the two beasts smashed down heavily onto the platform.

With a flash of white light, the Desert Wolf which was sitting on top of the Four-winged Eagle suddenly disappeared. Ashes knew then that Lorgar had already reached her limit. But fortunately, the outcome of this battle had already been decided. She took a dead Sand Nation warrior's robe and rushed toward the demonic beast.

Upon closer inspection, she could see that the demonic beast's back and the abdominal shell was pockmarked with several wounds. Some were scratches, while others were small holes that oozed green slime and blue blood. These wounds were probably left by the First Army, but none of them had inflicted fatal damage to the demonic beast.

She quickly found the motionless Princess Lorgar in the gap between the wings and carried her down the platform.

From the corner of her eye, she saw the longbow in Andrea's hands shining with golden light.

The hybrid demonic beast that had been wounded quite severely had its head swaying and was staggering on the ground when it suddenly found something resembling a golden sun next to it.

"Hey, what are you looking at?" Andrea laughed mockingly. "Fly away if you can."

"Shriek—!" It finally recovered its senses and tried spreading its wings in a panic to escape. But it was too late.

A blinding ray of light shot out from the Magical Longbow, and with a thundering whistle, it pierced through the demonic beast's body. In a flash, its body suddenly started emitting countless beams of golden light, as if a sun was trying to break out of its body and began engulfing it in its glow!

As it quieted down, a circular crater a few meters wide appeared in the middle of the platform. All that was left of the Four-winged eagle was a piece of its body lying on the edge of the gap, and its remaining body parts were splattered all over the place like tiny droplets of rain.

Andrea stood proudly in this torrential rain of flesh and gore, with her golden bow giving her long hair and alluring figure an eye-catching silhouette.

"Why are you still materializing your longbow? Are you wasting your magical power?" Ashes who was under the platform got grumpy and stood up.

"Of course, it's for the people here to remember my heroic appearance... ah, sh*t." She suddenly covered her mouth halfway through her sentence. "It's all your fault for making me talk. What if some bird meat fell into my mouth?"

Ashes could only roll her eyes at that.

...

The Wildflame chief Guelz had an ashen face as he gently received his daughter from Ashes. With his shoulders slightly quivering, he said, "Is Lorgar... "

"She's still alive, but it doesn't look good. Even the best herbal remedies can only delay her death." Ashes shrugged and said, "Unless we treat her immediately."

"You... have a way to cure her?"

"That's right, and she can be as healthy as she was before the duel."

Guelz stared with his eyes wide open and gazed at the Extraordinary witch for a while before finally slowly opening his mouth. "Then... what's the price?"

"You'll know soon enough," Ashes tugged her hand and said, "But

what I want to know is... Will you acknowledge the result of the holy duel?"

"Wildflame isn't Ironwhip, and we won't deny a victory that was won through blood and honor. Furthermore..." Guelz sighed and said, "no one can deny that you are currently the strongest clan. If you don't believe, you can listen for yourself..."

Ashes have certainly heard it.

Be it on the platform or the Burning Road, every single person present was shouting a single name in unison.

"Osha! Osha! Osha!"

It was among this cheer, that Echo climbed up to the platform.

"I am the chief of the Osha clan, Drow Silvermoon, but I also have another name, Echo of Graycastle's Witch Union!" Her voice sounded clearly above the noise of the crowd and reached everyone's ears. "I have lost everything since the betrayal of the Iron Whip clan. Not only was my clan exiled, but I was also sold into slavery, from the Port of Clearwater, all the way to the King's City in Graycastle. I was fortunate enough to be rescued by a witch organization. After that, I was transferred to a small town in the Western Region, where my name has been changed to Echo."

She paused momentarily, then said, "I prefer the name Echo more than Drow Silvermoon—though I have been through some

painful experiences, I am so much happier than I ever was in the desert. That town, which was once a desolate town on the border, has now become a bustling city. Most of the growth during this period was brought by a Lord, His Majesty Roland Wimbledon of Graycastle, and he was also the one who changed my destiny!"

Ashes were stunned. "This... doesn't sound like the rehearsed speech."

"Well," said Andrea, with a light chuckle, "it's what she's been wanting to say the most. And besides, all we can do now is applaud her."

In the beginning, Echo seemed a bit nervous, but once she started talking about Neverwinter's interesting lifestyle, she began to talk with increasing confidence. "I know you are curious as to why I'm saying all these things, after all, it's just someplace in the North. No matter how beautiful it is, it has nothing to do with our people in the Sand Nation. That's right... Maybe this was the way it used to be, but now things are not the same!"

"His Majesty's catchphrase is that Neverwinter will never discriminate based on origin. His city has people from all kinds of backgrounds: ordinary people from Graycastle, witches, and even people from foreign clans! This is enough to prove his kindness and benevolence. Now he intends to save the Ironsand people of the Mojin Clan from this blood-soaked, barren desert and grant you all a better life, just like he did when he helped the witches—and I'm carrying out the will of His Majesty, Roland Wimbledon, to deliver this news to all of you in the name of the strongest clan: he has decided to become the chief of the Mojin Clan to unify the

entire desert and treat us all as his people!"

Chapter 771: Desert Promise

"What is... a chief?"

"Sounds like the head of all the clans..."

"Isn't that the same as the Three Gods Emissary?"

The crowd began to discuss. At that moment, the head of the Black River clan that had descended to fourth place, jumped onto the platform and questioned loudly, "But the king of the northern kingdom you mentioned, Roland Wimbledon, is not a Mojins. How could he rule the entire desert?"

"Here it is," Ashes thought "This is one of the key problems that they have to deal with if they want to put the Southernmost Region into the prefecture of Graycastle. I'll see how Echo handles it."

Echo looked at him and asked peacefully, "Were the Three Gods Emissaries who used to rule the desert... Mojins?"

Her voice was not high, yet with the help of her magic power, it traveled to everyone's ears. The head of the Black River clan was startled when he heard it. "Um, well..."

"We all know that the answer is negative." Echo noticed his silence, so she looked under the platform and said, "The Three Gods Emissaries were real giants. It's said that they didn't have

uniform looks. One of them had four feet and three hands and another had more than one head. Undoubtedly, they were not Mojins."

At this point, she began to speak in a much higher pitch, "The few words left by the emissaries have become principals that are abided by all Ironsand people of the Mojin Clan. The laws carved onto the slate tells us about the desert rulers, one is being blessed by the Three Gods, the other is opening up boundless oases and keeping all the clans away from hunger, thirst, and death. Anyone who could accomplish any of those can become the ruler of the Southernmost Region."

The discussion in the crowd quieted down. Nobody wanted to object the laws left by the Three Gods Emissaries at the Land of Fire. In fact, the holy duel was a way to decide power distribution originated from the laws.

"But the Three Gods Emissaries did bring green land to the desert." The head of the Black River clan did not want to be neglected. He pointed at Echo and raised his voice, "It's said that 1,000 years ago, this area was an oasis! Is the king of Graycastle capable of that? Don't be deceived by false benefits. Anyone who owns that kind of power is not different from the deity."

"So as long as he could bring new oases to the Sand Nation, you'd admit that His Majesty is qualified of ruling the Southernmost Region and consider him as the chief, right?" Echo said with a smile.

"That's right. Not only me, I'm afraid all the other clans would

agree with me!" The head of the Black River clan kept his mouth shut for the first condition and took most of the audience's opinions as his own.

"Indeed, His Majesty can't convert the Southernmost Region into a green land, but he's willing to take our land into the territory of Graycastle and offer us residences near lakes and forests to keep us from the threats of thirst and sandstorm forever." Echo returned to the platform and said word by word, "This is the promise His Majesty made. He'll bring you a new oasis, the vast and rich northern area is exactly the boundless green oasis whose color will never fade."

Everybody was startled and could barely believe what they had heard.

Thuram was equally shocked.

This is the real purpose of the Osha clan!

That is the meaning of the new oasis and new order Iron Axe mentioned!

It has always been every Mojin's dream to live in an oasis that is forever green. Such a temptation is unimaginable, especially to those small clans that are too weak to grab a piece of the Iron Sand City. Although big clans might be hesitant and unwilling to see a drastic change in the Southernmost Region's order, they could not prevent the transmission of this message, probably within half a month, this astonishing message would spread through the entire

dessert by the clansmen on spot from every Silver Stream Oasis!

"No, this is absolutely nonsense. It's a lie, a fraud!" the head of the Black River clan shouted. "Have you forgotten the tragic ending of the Black Bone Clan and the Sandstone Clan? Didn't they die out and become extinct because they easily believed what Garcia, the Queen of Clearwater, said? Offering us an oasis and the source of water? The cunning northerners will never do that. They'll only give you a pond, or a piece of land as big as my palm, making you fight for these resources unceasingly as you did in the Southernmost Region where you have to work to death for them."

Thuram imperceptibly sighed. "If it were before the holy duel, this speech could have suppressed people's aspirations, but it's too late now."

In five duels, no one was killed. The merciful image of the Osha clan had spread through the small oasis. People could easily imagine that the northern kingdom's king who was supporting Osha was equally merciful. Obviously, someone merciful would not oppress the Sand Nation people as the Queen of Clearwater had done.

Even challengers like Black bone and Sandstone were willing to sell themselves cheap to Garcia, which was an indication of how attractive a land of survival was to them. Even if it might be a trap, some clansmen would like to take the risk. If the King of Graycastle sincerely wished to take the Southernmost Region into his domain, those pioneers would definitely become the examples for other clans to follow. As long as it started, the northwards migration of the whole Sand Nation would become inevitable.

This king obviously had all his moves well planned, making a show of strength to draw the clans' attention, killing nobody in duels to build a merciful image, becoming the chief of all clans by indisputably winning the holy duels and making the other forgiven major clans reluctant to turn against Osha under everybody's attention.

Thuram thought he would play a fairly important role in the process of the Osha clan settling in the Iron Sand City, but now he found that his role was only to supply Osha with his clansmen and information about the major clans in Iron Sand City. As to the real plan, he was totally kept in the dark. Echo did not take stationing in the Iron Sand City seriously and revenge was only as easy as lifting a hand to her. Thuram could not help but feel lost.

But after a short while, he rose with spirit again. If everything would go as the new leader said, Osha would undoubtedly become beyond the strongest clan. Then as a member of the Osha, he obviously would gain great benefits. In the face of this promising future, why bother feeling lost for the moment?

As expected, Echo slightly shook her head, "You're wrong, chief. What Garcia needs are mercenaries, not common clansmen, which was her biggest difference with His Majesty, which was also the reason why she picked Black bone and Sandstone who had stronger fighting capacities. Yet His Majesty won't do that. He considers all the Mojins as his own subjects, so any clans here can go to the Kingdom of Graycastle, regardless of how many young adults they have or whether they're powerful. His Majesty doesn't need the Sand Nation people to die for him, no merciful king would sit by and watch his subjects dying in vain!"

"What do you want in return? We ought to pay something for that." The Wildflame chief Geulz stood up and said, "He won't help the Sand Nation for nothing. I don't believe there is such a thing as free lunch!" He clenched the teeth, "Tell me. I'm willing to accept it."

"What His Majesty wants from you is simple, which is to work," Echo said frankly. "Like the other tens of thousands his subjects, work for the kingdom, work for yourself! You'll get paid, improve your lives, receive education and bring up children... That's all he wants."

"Is that... Is that all?" Guelz was startled.

"That's right. A way of living your life without fighting and struggling!" Echo raised her tone again. "Everyone knows that there are fewer and fewer Silver Stream oases... In my childhood, I could occasionally see oases near the south point of the Endless Cape. But now, the white wasteland near the northwest area is constantly expanding. The oases are deteriorating into sandy soil. Even the small oases around the Iron Sand City have shrunk. Do Mojins intend to keep on fighting and killing for living places, immersing the yellow sand with your blood and eventually disappearing with the oases in the Southernmost Region? Tell me, are you willing to accept this consequence?"

"No, my Lady."

"I'd like to go with you, Lady Silvermoon!"

"Please take me with you!"

Noises, like rolling waves, spread from the center of the platform to the surrounding areas.

Looking at the extremely pretty girl on the platform who'd drawn most of the clans' attention, Iron Axe could not help kneeling down with warm tears shedding.

He had dreamed of this occurring countless times, especially that night when the Osha clan became qualified for a duel participant. But when he woke up, the clan had disappeared and the princess had become a slave. He thought he would not live to see this happening.

But now, what Echo had accomplished was even further than he had dreamed. Although he even dropped tears over this, within his heart he was fulfilled and proud.

"Osha finally gains the Three Gods' favor."

"I understand there are still people hesitating, but soon what I said will be proved." Echo raised her right hand and said, "Those clans who want to follow me to the southern territories of Graycastle may pack right now and meet me at the small oasis before departure. Those who can't leave right away need not worry. I'll leave staff behind to guide those who wish to find suitable living places in the northern kingdom. As long as you abide by the Graycastle laws, you're His Majesty's subjects and will

be protected. Graycastle's door is always open to you."

Nobody knew how the cheer started. But it was like a drop of ink falling into water, soon it rippled and spread to the entire Land of Fire.

The major clans still remained silent. But compared with the crowd under the platform, they were insignificant.

The sounds of the clans from every corner of the Silver Stream exceeded that of those from Iron Sand City for the first time.

A crack appeared on the primitive and stiff order.

A new order was taking shape at the riot of sounds.

Tiny and immature as it might seem, but it exuded infinite vitality.

The crowd began to kneel down to cheer for the new strongest clan, as well as to bow to the chief. Not everybody had the nerve to be a pioneer, but there were always people who were brave enough to sacrifice everything for the evergreen land in their heart.

On that day, the cheers spread unceasingly through the Land of Fire.

From that day on, the desert had a new leader.

Chapter 772: The Arrival of the Relics

With the help of a Sigil of Listening, Roland received the result for the last holy duel, including everything that happened in the Land of Fire, by that afternoon.

Instantly he summoned Maggie, Lightning, and Nana to his office.

"There is a severely wounded witch in the Iron Sand City who needs your treatment." Roland looked at the three energetic girls—no, two girls and one legal girl, and said, "Prepare tonight and leave tomorrow. No need for haste as long as you arrive at Fallen Dragon Ridge by tomorrow evening and reach Iron Sand City the following day. Ashes will be there to receive you."

"Do both of us need to go?" Lightning asked, indicating Maggie and herself.

"Yes. I feel better when you're together," Roland said, nodding. "Besides, Maggie needs to be assisted when tying Nana onto her back, doesn't she? Remember to wear more clothing, it's hard to fly in freezing weather."

Nana couldn't help but shiver when she looked out the window at the falling snow.

"Understood. I promise, she will be delivered on time!" Maggie said as she raised her hand.

"Flying there is not a problem..." Lightning pouted, "but, if you want to start exploring the snow mountain, please wait until I come back! Missing it would have me in tears."

"Um... the moment when a great explorer cries... that's definitely a scene worth recording." Noticing the serious expression on Lightning's face, Roland couldn't help but laugh. He knew that since the news about the possibility of a relic on the snow mountain had spread, Lightning had been looking forward to it. "Of course, you're all crucial members of the expedition. I can assure you of that."

"That's settled then." Lightning patted her chest in relief as she said, "You can counting on us, we'll cure the wounded sister."

"You can also tend to other Sand Nation civilians along the way. But, don't stay for too long." Roland kept on going, "You should return on the day Nana has exhausted her magic power and take the same route when you return. Understand?"

With the relocation of Taquila survivors drawing to an end, he should start an expedition to the snow mountain. However, without Nana staying in Neverwinter, he did not dare to hastily send the witches to that unknown land.

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

"Alright."

"Coo!"

The three of them answered simultaneously.

After they had left, Roland leaned on his chair and let out a sigh of relief.

Nightingale stuck her head out from behind Roland as she asked, "Does this mean that you've successfully taken over the Southernmost Region?"

"I'd say we've only taken the first step," Roland said, smiling. "There are still many things to do."

After over a month of fighting, the Desert Mission had come to a temporary truce.

Unfortunately, the following migration was going to be the challenging task.

Roland fetched the map from the corner of his desk and laid it out. His sight landed on the southern territory of Graycastle. He had conveyed his plan to offer the Sand Nation civilians a new oasis before Iron Axe had departed. The preferred location would be the border area that had lost a lord and most of its populace. It had been successively struck by civil wars, that had been started by Timothy and Garcia. The main cities like the Port of Clearwater and Eagle City had been turned into ruins. The surrounding small

towns and farmland had also been destroyed..

With the refugees flowing into Neverwinter, the southern territory became a desolate wasteland. Rather than leaving them to ruin, Roland decided to let the Sand Nation reclaim them. They could start at the junctions, between the desert and green land, and gradually rebuild the Port of Clearwater.

By doing this, workers who were exploiting Blackwater could start off at the Port of Clearwater, and reach the southern point of the desert by sea. According to Iron Axe's report, most of the underground Styx's Rivers lay to the south of the Land of Fire, mostly under the Endless Cape. In that area, Blackwater tributaries flowed close to the ground and near the coastline. When compared to the danger-ridden land route, traveling along the coastline was much safer apparently. Given the present technology level of Neverwinter, the coastline was undoubtedly the preferred exploitation location.

It would take some time for these events to take effect in the Southernmost Region. Clans that heard the news might not leave for the Southern Territory immediately. Regardless, the temptation of an oasis would be irresistible to the Sand Nation civilians. Even if only a few clans move there in the beginning, eventually more would follow and ultimately become Roland's subjects.

Thus, not only would he gain a large labor force and prevent the land from going to waste, but the revived residence would also stop the roving bandits that traveled inland. This made it so Roland didn't need to deploy a large force of manpower to work in the

desert and the subjects that wanted to live in the Southern Territory would also find an abode.

Of course, there were hidden dangers as well.

One challenge would be merging his people with the Ironsand people of the Mojin Clan.

Yet, Roland wasn't overly concerned.

Leaving aside the unawakened democracy, this world's religions were thought-provoking enough—they didn't require one to be too religious, but more like a pure nature worship. Both of the nations used the same language; the Sand Nation's lifestyle and customs were not so much a special culture, but more of an adaption to the desert. Iron Axe and Echo were perfect examples. The two of them had roamed all the way to Border Town, and fit in well without too much difficulty.

As long as his law enforcement was strict and the punishments and rewards were fair, Roland believed that the Ironsand people of the Mojin Clan would also become qualified workers.

Just in case there was a rebellion, the First Army that had been stationed in the Southern Territory and Fallen Dragon Ridge happened to be more than mere ornaments.

The more pressing issue Roland cared about was following up on the hybrid demonic beasts Iron Axe mentioned, that had attacked

the witches. If his recollection was accurate, it sounded like an unavoidable accident had caused the desertification of the Southernmost Region. Geographically speaking, this piece of pointy land adjacent to the mainland was not far from Graycastle, which made such an abrupt change happening highly unlikely. Unfortunately, for the moment, he was too short-handed to explore the Southernmost Region, so he would have to ignore this quandary temporarily.

While what the demonic hybrid did was inconceivable—this abnormal lifeform owned a modicum of intelligence. Roland had learned this from his own experience, so, what had driven it to attack the witches despite the risk? If the inland demonic beasts had sieged the human cities under the influence of the relics of gods, then the Four-winged Eagle had obviously attacked witches for some other reason.

While Roland was thinking hard, Wendy and Phyllis knocked on the door before they walked in. "Your Majesty, the last batch of facilities that had been shipped from Taquila will arrive at the Third Border City soon. Pasha invited you to meet her underground."

"Finally they arrived." Roland became excited when he heard the news. The so-called Third Border City was actually an underground bunker that had been built under the Impassable Mountain Range. This place functioned similar to a city and essentially served as a secret stronghold. The last batch of facilities was the Instrument of Divine Retribution and the relics of gods. To ensure their safe arrival, the First Army that had been stationed at Neverwinter provided the escort.

"What about the demonic beasts? Any movement?"

"No sign of a massive gathering for the moment."

"Is that so..." Roland stood up and said, "Let's get started then."

Chapter 773: The Third Border City

The entrance to the cave was located to the north of Neverwinter. It could be found in the juncture between the city and the mountain range. On the nearby hillside, there was the ever-busy mining and furnace areas.

Near the foot of the mountain, a solid concrete wall appeared in front of everybody. Although there were many facilities still under construction, this place had already become the most heavily guarded area in Neverwinter. There was a watch tower on each one of its corners and wired netting lining the top of it. There was also a machine gun blockhouse on each side of the gate.

The guards saluted Roland as he walked through the gate and into the yard.

Upon walking into the yard, he faintly felt as if he had traveled back to the modern world.

What he saw in here was definitely not supposed to be in this era. There was a huge cave that had its entrance covered with concrete. The cave was over ten meters wide and over 5 meters tall. The two grand iron doors were oversized compared to the entrance and their thickness reached an astonishing one meter. They were not solid poured but were rather jointed by several layers of steel plates. This was on par with many doors at modern military strongholds.

Since the iron doors weighed so much, the entrance had to be

modified and slideways were installed on the ground to support the doors. Even with the slideways, they could not be pulled open by manpower alone.

Due to this, one of the two steam engines in the yard was used to provide the driving force to move the doors.

If the demonic beasts broke the defensive line set up by the Taquila witches, as long as the relic of gods got retrieved, these two doors could block any following demonic beasts outside.

Standing in front of the doors that were as big as a multi-layered building, Roland could feel their solidness. Almost 1/3 of Neverwinter's winter steel output was used to build these two doors. Their simple rectangular shape might seem easy to produce, but their size alone required a higher level of skill.

On the day the doors were installed, Roland had witnessed the scene as they were opened and shut. Listening to the toneless roar of the steam engine, the harsh grating on the sliding tracks, and watching the slowly closing doors, Roland felt as if he was in charge of the entrance that protected them from doomsday.

On each side of the two iron doors, there was half a line of words. Combined together, they meant the Third Border City.

Roland and the crowd of people that followed him walked into the cave. The light suddenly dimmed.

Phyllis took out the Stone of Lighting and walked in the front of the team. She began to lead everybody down the deep cave.

"Your Majesty, I don't quite get why you call this place the Third Border City." Wendy said with bewilderment, "If the outside Border Area is the first Border City, then where is the second Border City?"

"Because the third is the proper title," Roland replied.

"Ah?"

"Anyway, don't you think the number three goes quite well with a stronghold? Besides, it doesn't matter what name we give it. What matters is people can remember it," Roland said with his hands laid out.

"Alright, as long as you like it," Wendy said, twitching her mouth.

After they stopped talking, the only sounds in the cave were the echoing footsteps and water dripping.

Due to the lack of spraymecs, only the floor of the cave was paved with concrete. On the two sides of the floor was a ditch and a mine railway. If materials and food were needed, they would be transported by carts hauled by the other engine at the entrance. Roland had heard from Phyllis that the God's Punishment Witches were once interested in measuring the power of the machine, and

they found out that even five of them pulling a rope together could not stop the steam engine from dragging them forward.

Since the walls and ceiling of the cave could not be covered with concrete, leaking became inevitable. Luckily, the temperature inside of the mountain would not get too low so the water inside would not freeze. While devouring worms would leave a trail of mucus behind while crawling forward, when its mucus dried out, it would glue the dirt together as if smearing a layer of paste on the surface of the walls and ceiling. Because of this, there was no danger that the cave would collapse.

After about a half an hour's walk, the cave got brighter.

"We're almost there." Phyllis slowed down. "Your Majesty, do you need..."

Roland knew what she wanted to say and interrupted her. "It's ok. Take me there now."

The God's Punishment Witch turned back and looked meaningfully at Roland, "... Ok, I understand."

Upon exiting the narrow cave, they entered a large cavern. In front of them was a spacious dome building that was the size of a football field. Throughout the cavern, tens of light beams were projected onto the dome and cast bright spots on the floor. With the help of this light, people would not feel oppressed in this area even though they were deep under the mountains. Besides the witches, the First Army was also dispatched to guard this place.

Each of the soldiers had been examined by Nightingale personally to make sure they were Roland's strongest supporters.

The deeper into the dome they went in, the more they got away from this light. In the center of the spacious dome, there was only a few rhombus shaped magic cores. They were the three Taquila Senior Witches... or in other words, original carriers.

Roland walked to the three of them with a smile on his face. He stuck out his right hand toward the leading blob monster. "Finally we could meet. You must be Pasha, aren't you?"

At that moment, Roland could feel someone panting behind him and felt that a hand was on his shoulder. Undoubtedly, if anything went wrong, Nightingale would drag him into the Mist instantly.

The blob being fell silent for a while then a familiar voice sounded, "I'm surprised, Your Majesty. Before today, we've only been communicating through the Illusion Core. Perhaps the illusionary images weren't that frightening, but at this moment, in front of me, the calmness you're showing is astonishing. To be honest, you're the first one who's seen this shell and reacted as if nothing had happened. Even when the Taquila witches first saw this form, they weren't as calm as you are. I'm curious, aren't you afraid at all?" She paused, reached out a tentacle, and gently tangled it with Roland's hand. "But you're right. I'm Pasha. Thanks for supporting the Taquila witches."

"He hasn't supported us. It's hard to say whether the group of common people he sent are meant to help or supervise us," a cold consciousness came in. "It won't be too late to tell him after he

finishes exploring the big snow mountain."

"Alethea! We made an agreement!" a third voice interrupted.

"Alright. I'll shut up."

It seemed the other two were Alethea and Celine, who often appeared beside Pasha. Roland did not mind their tones. Firstly, those ancient witches had lived in an era where witches were superior and so it would be difficult for them to change their mindset. Secondly, compared to having their attitudes changed, he wished more to make some substantial gains.

"The Fjords' most famous explorer once said that fear comes from unknown. No matter how you look, your souls belong to Taquila witches," Roland said, smiling, "and I'm no stranger to the latter. Agatha has become an essential member of the Witch Union and a beloved and trusted member at that."

Roland noticed that Pasha's tentacle was rather coarse and the surface of it was not as dry as it looked. The surface of her tentacle felt moist. Perhaps it was because she constantly crawled in the dirt. Roland could clearly feel the warmth beneath her skin. This giant blob in front of him was, undoubtably, a fresh lifeform.

"...I see," Pasha's voice sounded sentimental, "and you're right. Our cooperation had begun long ago."

"Faced with the threats of the demons, everybody should let go of

past prejudices and try hard to join hands." After some short casual conversation, Roland came to the main subject. "The relics of gods have arrived, right? Can I have a look at the things that determine mankind's lives?"

Pasha waved the main tentacles on top of her head. "Of course. Come with me."

Chapter 774: [Divine Land]

Roland curiously observed the Taquila Senior Witches as they moved. Their tentacles played different roles. The short ones twisted like snakes so they could stand and walk while the long ones constantly inserted themselves into the mud to correct directions. Some tentacles were amazingly long. Based on the height of dome's ceiling, the tentacles were over 100 meters long and could shrink freely like arms.

Even the strongest muscles could not support such long tentacles. Roland guessed that the magic power in the blob enabled them to walk freely, just like the giant demonic beasts that apparently broke the limits of gravity.

After walking a couple dozen steps and passing two magic cores, Pasha stopped in front of a cube which seemed to be made of gemstone.

"That's a God's Stone of Retaliation. I can't get too close..." Nightingale whispered in his ear to remind him.

Roland nodded silently and asked Pasha, "is the relic in it?"

"Yes. While keeping it locked up, we can limit its summoning range. If we did not put it in a box made of God's Stone of Retaliation, I'm afraid the residents in your city would be unconsciously affected by the relic." Pasha stretched out a few tentacles and placed them on the box without immediately opening it. "Before you have contact with it, I have to clarify some

points lest you have an accident."

"Is it... dangerous?" Wendy stepped forward and subconsciously stood in front of Roland.

"Don't be too worried. As long as you don't stay alone with the relic, it'll be alright," Celine interrupted.

"What do you mean by that?" Roland asked, raising his eyebrows.

Pasha became more serious and said, "as I have said before, if you open yourself up in front of the relic, you can see some incredible sights. Either a witch or a common person can be summoned. But remember, what you see isn't completely fictional. It's different from the phantom instrument, what you see in the painting scrolls will have an impact on reality. That's the first thing I want to clarify. Don't accept the summoning of deities alone at any time."

Roland immediately felt a chill creep up his spine, thinking, "The sight in the painting can affect reality? Isn't that the same as Sadako Yamamura climbing out from television?"

"Why is it not dangerous when there are more people?"

Pasha explained, "Because once you're trapped in the Divine Land, you'll have some obvious reactions, for example, glazed eyes, dull body, ravings., etc. The people around you have to drag you out of the range of the relic. In the historical records, many people had once be summoned by the relic alone and then their souls

could not return to their bodies. Two or three people having contact with it that take turns effectively reduces the risk."

Roland glanced at the Taquila witches and said, "I got it. In other words, since there are at least five people here, it's not that dangerous at all, right?"

Celine nodded. "If this wasn't so, we wouldn't allow you to watch it at close range."

Alethea coldly said, "there's another point we need to warn you about. You should know that the huge painting scrolls in the relic display the demon civilizations. If you have a chance to see them, they may... No, they'll definitely try to hurt you. We can help you wake up from the summoning, but we can't help you resist the horror of it." She paused for a moment and continued with a sneer in her tone, "if you're too scared and make a scene at that time, don't blame me for not warning you."

"That's what you wanted to clarify?" Roland remained undisturbed. "Anything else you want to say?"

"You..." Alethea probably did not expect him to be so indifferent and could not help feeling slightly stifled.

"If not, then open it."

Roland sighed silently. As a modern man who enjoyed all kinds of monster, alien, thriller and horror movies, he had a much broader

horizon than the ancient people. If he was unprepared, he might be scared. But what Alethea said was, in some sense, sort of a spoiler . As long as it would not cause him real harm, he did not think that he would give up exploring the mystery of the deities.

"I see," Pasha shrunk her tentacles and opened the God's stone box to reveal a spindle-shaped red crystal.

It floated up from the box by itself and then it, like the magic cores, quietly floated in the air about a meter above the ground.

"It can't get out of the range of the God's stone. You need to get close to it and relax, then you can enter the Divine Land."

"Your Majesty..." said Wendy, grabbing Roland's hand with some concern.

"Don't worry. It won't be dangerous since you're here. I know what I'm going to face," he said, gently patting the red-haired witch's hand to comfort her.

Other than the information given by the Taquila witches, he also learned some information from Isabella's memory and his exploration of Pivotal Secret Temple of the Church in the Dream World. They proved that something could indeed bring people into an incredible "Divine Land".

Roland sat down cross-legged beside the relic and closing his eyes.

...

Meanwhile, Pasha stretched out her tentacles to connect with those of her companions.

Their consciousness quickly connected together and reflected what they intended to say in each other's mind.

A furious Alethea said, "how dare he be so arrogant? I can't wait to see him scare and tremble. Otherwise, he'll never truly realize what terrible enemies he'll face. When he wets himself, I wonder what he'll say."

Celine glared at her angrily. "What good will that do us? Any ordinary king is very concerned about dignity and prestige. If you make him disgrace himself then I'm afraid he'll hate us. How can we explore the snow mountain and look for the Chosen One if we lose his support? Even worse, what if he becomes terrified of the demons? The whole world will lose hope!"

"He said he was not afraid of anything. Anyway, I warned him. Do you think you can stop him?"

Celine muttered, "it was a mistake to bring him here to contact the relic. I didn't recommend doing so from the very beginning. At least we should have waited until we reach a basic level of trust."

Pasha softly sighed. "So should we just hide it from him or

prevent him from approaching the relic then? We'll never get his trust that way. Put yourself in his shoes. Would you trust an ally who is unwilling to allow you to know about the key that determines the fate of human destiny? No matter how you explain, he won't appreciate it. Only after he experiences it in person will he understand our sincerity."

"But..."

"But it's also unnecessary to be too worried. The demon and the Giant Eye don't show up every time. Besides, even if he's too scared and made a mistake, we can promise that we'll keep our lips buttoned and never reveal it to other people. I think he'll understand." Pasha said to reassure Celine and herself,

"What about the two witches coming with him? Will they keep that secret too?" Asked Alethea with malicious intent. She, undoubtedly, regarded it as a pleasure to see a common person lose face in front of witches.

"That's not our business."

...

When Roland opened his eyes again, he found himself in an infinitely spacious palace.

Chapter 775: Hello, World

The sky dome, the Bloody Moon, the Giant Paintings... They were all just as Pasha described.

All of them were extremely magnificent. No wonder they called it the Divine Land. Only when he was in here could he truly feel its vastness.

Was this a broadcast or perhaps a way of controlling the subconscious mind?

Roland squatted down to lightly stroke the floor. It seemed to be made of polished stones but it was as smooth as a mirror. He could feel both its coldness and toughness through his fingers. It appeared what he saw was real rather than fictional.

Due to having had similar experiences in the Dream World before, which was already extremely real, he would not freak out overseeing this.

Roland looked up at the dome. The huge Bloody Moon hanging above the Giant Painting was like a round pancake. With a careful observation, he could see the surging ripples on its surface. To be more exact, the moon was like a sea. It was not as bright and dazzling as the sun. Though it appeared to be scarlet, he could not feel its light or heat. The red ripples were waves or vortexes, densely covering the entire Bloody Moon.

The only problem was that this circle was a bit too perfect.

It looked like a flat circle rather than a sphere.

Perhaps the Bloody Moon was too close to him?

Roland stared at it for quite a while but failed to associate it with the Red Meteor observed by the astrologers. It was neither a planet nor a star. If the Battle of Divine Will was really caused by it, then how could it come to earth?

An idea suddenly popped into his mind.

If Astrologer of Dispersion Star, the Chief Astrologer, came to be summoned by the relic, could he figure out whether this stuff among the flickering stars was indeed the Bloody Moon?

Of course, he could not guarantee that the poor old man would not directly faint out of fear.

Roland shrugged, stood up, and looked at the four Giant Paintings around the Bloody Moon.

They showed a throne, a sea, a black screen, and himself.

Besides the underground dome in the Third Border City, he had already read the records of these paintings in the library of Pivotal Secret Temple. They were not that strange. A relic was like a recorder which constantly reflected the world around it. According

to the description of Pasha, the Giant Painting that became a totally black screen was the eliminated underground civilization.

Roland greeted Wendy and himself in the painting, but they did not respond. They apparently could not hear him.

Seeing this, he wondered why Pasha said that the Divine Land would have an impact on reality.

He approached the painting of the throne and touched the painting scroll with his fingers. It felt like a soft and smooth cloth with a delicate texture. The image was just an image as he could not cross its border and walk into the painted world.

Roland walked around but made no further discoveries. He planned to walk outside the palace to find out whether the land was boundless when he suddenly heard some noises from the painting scroll behind him.

It was extremely loud in such a quiet place. It sounded like the rubbing of steel objects or the echo of a hard object hitting the ground.

He immediately felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up!

"What the hell! No one mentioned these giant paintings could also make a sound!"

He stopped and suddenly turned around.

In the first painting, a dark-armored warrior had suddenly appeared, sitting on the throne. His scarlet eyes looking down at him.

There was also some movement in one of the other paintings.

With many bubbles surging upwards with a soft gurgling sound, a huge eyeball emerged from the dark sea. It got closer and closer to the edge of the painting as if it intended to escape from the frame. There were three pupils in a triangular shape that stared at him at the same time. It was making him really uncomfortable at first glance.

Did you invite each other to come together?

Roland could not help feeling relieved. As long as they did not hide and play tricks on him, he was not afraid of these two monsters. They were not at all frightening in appearance.

They were just a Senior Demon and a guardian of the relic of an unknown civilization.

He walked to the center of four Giant Paintings and looked up to stare at the two alien creatures.

"Good afternoon. Did you also come to participate in the Battle of Divine Will?"

"Must we fight to the finish? Can't we just sit down and talk about it?"

"Can you understand me?"

"Say something even if you can't!"

"Hey, is this a winking game? If you wink, you'll lose?"

Roland tried to communicate with them some more but never received any response.

He did not know whether it was an illusion, but he felt that the demon was breathing more and more rapidly and the huge eyeball gradually trembled.

Was this the side effect of staring at each other? Were they just able to stare at him until their eyes felt sore? How could it be described as dangerous? It was not a problem for him to visit here alone.

He rolled his eyes and intended to end this boring staring contest by turning around, but noticed out of the corner of his eye that a group of black tentacles had suddenly appeared in the painting scrolls!

They stretched toward the demon and the eyeball, moving like a snake and wrapped around them very tightly.

"What... the hell?" Roland was stunned.

The demon finally moved. He tightly grasped the throne and screamed with a weird voice. Flames and transparent blades emerged around him to fight the tentacles; however, the tentacles outnumbered them. The soft and tiny hands at the end of tentacles could easily break the weapons summoned by the demon.

The demon seemed to be fighting a very powerful, invisible enemy and his screams became even fiercer. Roland could feel the tension in his tone. As an electric light burst out from the armor, the tentacles finally shrank and loosened their control. Taking advantage of this opportunity, the demon, with some difficulty, pushed himself out of the throne and ran out of the range of the Giant Painting without hesitation. He had even broken a piece of the throne's armrest in panic.

The Giant Eye was not doing any better as several tentacles had already pierced into the eyeball. Roland could even feel its pain when looking at it. Light blue liquid flew out from the holes like tears. Instead of screaming like the demon, the Giant Eye constantly gave off harsh lights from its three pupils to block most of the tentacles.

Suddenly, all the pupils of the Giant Eye simultaneously opened and a looming ripple dashed toward the Giant Painting. Roland immediately felt an overpowering stench blowing towards him and he could not help but take a step backward. At the same time, the tentacles let go the eyeball and the eyeball quickly retreated back in the direction where it came and disappeared into the

darkness in a blink. The rippling blue water turned darker and darker as the eyeball sank and it became completely black after a while.

"Uh... What happened?"

Roland glanced at the painting of the throne, which was a mess, and observed the painting of the sea which had turned dark again, not knowing how to respond for a long time.

Chapter 776: Contrary to Common Sense

"It has been nearly ten minutes, it seems that he hasn't met anything," said Celine in relief,

"It's a pity that he has really good luck." Alethea responded much less excitedly.

Celine complained, "I don't want to count on chance. Please choose a safer method next time."

"Let's not talk about what has already happened. Let's guess how long the king can stay in there. Isn't the longest record for a common person less than 15 minutes even taking into account the those who tried in the Land of Dawn?" said Alethea, changing the topic.

"Witches do not fair any better. How long you can stay in the Divine Land has nothing to do with your magic power. Even in the Union, the relic was constantly monitored by a group of common people in turns. However, considering the king's age and experience, he should come out soon."

According to all the records that Celine had read through, the warriors who had been to the battlefield and fought the demons generally persisted longer, whether a witch or a common person. The highest record was held by Lady Alice, who had stayed there for almost two hours. As a king who had never been to the battlefield, Roland had to be very skilled to last so long.

"Maybe he'll want to stay longer. After all, it's his first time to witness such a marvelous scene."

"Then he'll feel dizzy and even fall unconscious." Celine suddenly realized something and looked at Pasha. "Did you forget to tell him that?"

"A coma isn't too bad and won't cause him any real damage." Pasha shook her tentacles and said, "on the contrary, when he runs out energy, this kind of unpleasant thing can reduce his interest in getting in contact with the relic again. It's better for everyone this way."

"So... you didn't forget to tell him?"

Pasha did not directly answer. "Sometimes it's better to not explain. None of us would like to have so many restraints when we explore the Divine Land."

"I now understand why Lady Natalia chose you as one of the candidates for the Three Chiefs," said Alethea, smacking her lips.

Celine agreed with Alethea. Compared to the disgrace of being scared, a coma due to energy exhaustion could be regarded as a result without side effects. It could reduce the curiosity of the common people while not destroying their relationship with them. Pasha obviously had more foresight than them.

After a while, she began to frown slightly and asked, "It's been

more than a quarter of an hour. Is he okay?"

"It seems... nothing is wrong. This king seems to be full of surprises." Pasha replied after glancing at the sitting Roland Wimbledon.

"It's a new record for common people. Should I say congratulations?" said Alethea, shrugging her main tentacle.

Celine gave no response. She felt a little uneasy like something was wrong.

The waiting that followed seemed to validate her guess.

Another 15 minutes later, Roland still remained motionless and she was getting more and more anxious.

Having lived for over a hundred years, she should feel disconnected from time; however, the almost constant heart pulse of her shell could accurately tell her the change of every second. A 45 minutes exploration was too long for someone who was not a warrior or an Extraordinary. He should have run out of energy by now.

Celine wondered, "was... there some unobserved accident in the Divine Land?"

Wendy could not help step forward and try to wake up the king, but was immediately stopped by Pasha.

"If you get too close to the relic, you'll be affected by it too."

"Then let me enter the Divine Land and bring His Majesty back!"
She insisted.

"Even if you go there, you can't bring back your king. No matter how many people are simultaneously summoned by it, they'll see a different Divine Land."

Celine noticed that the other witch that had been hidden had begun to move. From the vague magic reaction, Celine knew that she had taken something out of her pocket. Based on the information collected by Phyllis, it should be a unique weapon of Neverwinter.

She passed her concerns along to the other two and then Pasha nodded and took immediate action. She stretched out her tentacles to wrap around the king and pulled him back to Wendy. Though it was not the ideal way to end the exploration, the safety of Roland was top priority. If both sides conflicted with each other, the consequences would be disastrous.

...

As the relic was put back into the God's Stone box, Roland suddenly opened his eyes.

"Your Majesty... Are you okay?" Wendy asked eagerly, helping

him to stand up.

"There is nothing wrong... I'm fine," he answered, rubbing his sore legs. "I met alien monsters who were guarding the other two relics and talked to them. Unfortunately, they did not understand my words."

Celine was shocked. "Wait, what are you talking about? Did... you meet the demon and..."

"And a huge eyeball. It seemed to stay in a boat that can move underwater... but I'm not sure if it's a boat or something else," Roland answered.

Even though she could not see her companions' expressions, she could feel their shock through their shared connection, especially Alethea's. Among all the survivors, she had stayed in the Divine Land for the longest time. Her experience in Blessed Army enabled her to persist for about an hour but only when nothing appeared in the painting scrolls.

If she met the demon or an unknown enemy, the speed of energy consumption would be doubled!

"What happened then?" Pasha continued to ask.

"I'm not really sure. Anyway, some black tentacles suddenly popped up in the painting scrolls and attacked them. Those tentacles were so powerful that the monsters had to retreat from

the paintings. It happened in only a few minutes."

Did he mean that he had met the guardians of the other two civilizations at the same time and defeated them while not being injured at all?

Celine felt as if she was listening to a fairy tale.

She was not surprised by the presence of black tentacles. As the energy of the user declined, the relic would have an greater impact on them. He might hear imaginary sounds, see imagery scenes, tentacles or something else one by one. They were not merely mental disturbances but they could do real harm to the body. That was why Pasha emphasized that they were more than illusions. If they interrupted the summoning before any real harm was caused, the user would not have a serious problem.

Of course, it was impossible for ordinary people to defend themselves against the spiritual erosion. Even a witch who had experienced thousands of battles would quickly feel tired and eventually lose control of her body.

But what Roland faced was a completely reversed situation and the black tentacles had rushed toward the enemy. She had never heard of such an instance.

Looking at the king, who seemed not to care about what had happened, Celine suddenly had an incredible guess.

Was this ordinary person comparable to Lady Alice, Queen of Starfall City and Head of the Three Chairs, in terms of mental power?

However, he did not seem to be aware of it. After stretching his arms and legs, he laughed and said, "Anyway, thank you for pulling me out. I intended to see if there was any border to the Divine Land, but it was too large and I did not want to walk all the way back."

The three witches remained speechless for a long while and then Pasha finally broke the silence. "Ahem... that's all right. Do you still want to continue exploring the relic?"

Roland shook his head and said, "not right now. There are just four painting scrolls and it won't make much difference to have another look at them. Take me to the central carrier."

Chapter 777: Question and Answer

Ever since the previous meeting with the Taquila witches, Roland had looked forward to meeting with the central carrier.

To decipher the literature left by the underground civilization, many Taquila survivors had sacrificed themselves by merging their souls, but it could only answer yes or no questions. Otherwise, it was basically a useless object. Thinking of this solemn story, he felt that an air of mystery shrouded this central carrier.

When Roland finally saw it, he gasped in shock. It was chained up in a secret chamber under the hall.

This blob, much bigger than any original carrier such as the one occupied by Pasha, was heavily chained. Its thickest tentacles were forced apart and nailed to the walls or the ceiling. From its badly scarred skin and its broken tentacles, he could tell that it was not the first time she was treated this way.

He remembered that it was able to feel things just like the original carriers.

It was able to feel the heat and cold, taste the sweet and bitter, and feel pain.

He could not help knitting his eyebrows, asking, "Why? I remember the volunteers integrating with the central carrier were all witches, even including one of your Three Chiefs, E..."

"Lady Eleanor, Your Majesty," Pasha sighed. "We had no choice. Carriers are as powerful as God's Punishment Warriors. Their tentacles can drill into the earth and build a light well in the dome. They can also attack enemies and tear a prey in half. If we don't keep her here, she'll subconsciously move around and cause us lots of trouble. If that happens, she'll be even harder to deal with than those hybrid demonic beasts."

Roland quickly understood Pasha's feelings of powerlessness. He guessed that this tentacle blob might be a combat unit created by the underground civilization, but if it lost its mind and got out of control, it would be a serious threat to the relic of gods and the magic core. He believed that the Taquila survivors did not want to take this risk and as a result, they had no choice but to keep it trapped here.

However, knowing the reason did not make him feel any better.

He felt sad for the witches who had willingly sacrificed everything for Taquila only to end up imprisoned in this dark corner.

Seeing Roland contemplate these emotions, Pasha said with a mixed expression of gratitude and sadness, "We tried to ask about their feelings, but we were unable to get a response. The souls merged with the central carrier cannot be separated again by the magic core, so we have no idea whether they're able to feel what's going on."

Alethea who remained quiet suddenly spoke again, "All the Taquila witches, including us, have determined to follow Lady Eleanor forever. You don't have to feel too bad for them. They knew the what they were going into" Roland somehow felt that her voice wasn't as cold as before.

Well... If it had been as cold as dry ice, it's now only cool as iced water.

Celine added, "When we asked the central carrier whether we should chain her, all her three main tentacles answered yes. If she hadn't agreed to this, we would not have tied her up so tightly."

Roland nodded and said, "Maybe the Witch Union can help you with this problem. Soraya can produce flexible fabrics to replace the iron chains, and a little girl named Softfeathers can stick things together. If they work together, they may find some way to constrain her without hurting her. If you don't mind..."

Pasha slightly lowered the main tentacle on her head and said, "That will be great. You have my gratitude."

"Don't worry about it." Roland replied then asked. "What did you mean by 'all three main tentacles answered yes'? She can say yes with one main tentacle and no with another at the same time? When that happens, how can you make sure of what she's trying to say?"

"Let Celine explain that to you."

Hearing that there may be a way to alleviate the pain of the witches in the central carrier, Celine seemed quite excited and answered, "The central carrier is different from us. It has three main tentacles, which enables her to express more complicated information without communicating through telepathy, which is what I'm doing right now."

With these words, Celine's main tentacle on her head emitted a beam of dim red light.

"Oh? It can even shine?"

"Yes, before we learned how to communicate through thoughts, we often used this method to express our feelings and emotions. But now we don't use it as much anymore." She moved to the center of the secret chamber, pointing at the three main tentacles which were hanging from the central carrier's head and were nailed to the ground. "Without consciousness, she can't express her feelings. She's only able to reply yes or no through the red light. If a main tentacle shines, it means yes. If it doesn't, it means no."

She continued to explain, "However, when we were deciphering the literature of the underground civilization, we realized that a simple yes or no couldn't quickly help us find the correct answers. For example, if we mistake the sentence 'I'm a Taqila witch' for 'I'm a witch' or 'I'm Taquila', she'll answer no. With this method, we would have to spend a lot of time on confirming each simple sentence."

Roland immediately understood what she meant. "So you counted her shining main tentacles to see how close you got to the

right answer."

Celine exclaimed, "You really are smart. That's right. When we read her something closer to the right answer, she would show us more red lights. When all three of her main tentacles shone, it meant that the answer was either 100 percent correct or she couldn't agree more."

Roland felt touched yet again by these witches, thinking, "So that was how this fusion of all the witches' souls including Eleanor's confirmed that they should be constrained underground? Even though it was unclear whether these souls made this decision for the sake of safety or based on their own feelings, this choice was still quite moving."

He took a deep breath, asking, "May I ask her some questions?"

Celine moved to the side and answered, "Yes, of course. You can just ask her directly."

Roland approached the central carrier and asked slowly, "Suppose now I've two baskets. Each basket has two apples inside. After I dump out all the baskets, there are four apples on the ground. Is it right?"

All the three tentacles shone at once.

Celine was startled, "Uhm... Is that what you wanted to ask?"

Wendy also felt a little embarrassed at this moment, asking, "Your Majesty, what're you up to now?"

"It's just a test," Roland remained calm and continued to ask the second question. "Now suppose that I've got 12,345 baskets, and each basket has 54,321 apples. If I dump out all the baskets, how many apples are there on the ground?" He took out a paper strip and continued, "I guess there are this many apples. Am I right?"

He read out the correct answer he had prepared in advance, which was a nine-digit number. The calculation required to get this number should be considered quite complex at this age. He believed that people who had never gone through Neverwinter's Mathematics education could never get the right answer in a short amount of time. This can be seen from the shared silence amongst the Taquila Senior Witches.

However, all the three main tentacles of the central carrier shone red without delay after hearing what he said. Just as they did to the first question.

Chapter 778: Commandeering a Meeting

Amazed by the result, Roland was lost in thoughts.

This central carrier can figure out a nine-digit multiplication! No matter the method she used, whether it be using summation or column multiplication, she managed to find the correct answer instantly. This must mean that her calculating skills far surpass those of the common people. Even if she's only able to answer yes or no, she'll still be of great assistance to the Arithmetic Academy. At the very least, she can check the calculation results of the academy members which can help minimize the mistakes of large and complex calculation projects.

He squatted down excitedly and with a child-like grin, patted a main tentacle of the central carrier, "You're brilliant."

The red light went out.

Pasha reminded him, "Your Majesty, she can't communicate with you directly."

"She can understand my words and even give me yes or no answers. This already counts as a kind of communication." Roland believed that communication, in essence, is just the receiving and sending of information. The central carrier can at worst be described as having troubles expressing her thoughts and thus couldn't "communicate" as a normal person could. He was not discouraged by this in the slightest and intended to continue finding out whether the central carrier was really limited to just

giving out yes or no responses.

After pondering for a while, he said, "Now let's suppose lighting one main tentacle means one and lighting two tentacles means two. Can you give me a three with your red light?"

The question seemed to be much simpler than the five-digit multiplication, but it served an entirely different purpose. If the central carrier could display a correct answer to this question, it would mean that she was able to give more elaborate feedback to questions. Moreover, she might also be able to display calculation results directly in some way.

However, the central carrier did not instantly answer like before. After a few seconds, one of her tentacles started to glow, another one only glimmered, while the last one remained dark.

According to Celine, the central carrier meant that what Roland said was 30 percent correct.

However, this signal did not last for long.

The light of the glimmering tentacle went out very quickly and was soon followed by the glowing one.

"So the answer is a no?" He wondered.

"This is..."

Celine slightly sighed and explained, "This is beyond her capacity. She had to express her agreement in a more complicated way to your question and thus got confused." She paused before continuing, "We've tried to ask her to express simple ideas and even some short sentences. However, once she found out that she could not answer a question simply with a yes or no, she would respond much slower and also easily get confused like how she just did."

Roland said, frowning, "Does this mean I have caused some sort of a logical barrier in her brain? Is she... alright?"

Celine waved her tentacles, answering, "she'll be alright after a moment of rest. I once tried asking her some contradictory questions. As a result, she ignored the rest of our questions for several weeks."

Now Roland was certain that this bio-computer was going to be difficult to handle, but he still did not want to give up his plan of creating a new communication system to help the central carrier express more complicated ideas by answering yes or no. As she could check the calculation result, he thought that she must have known the correct answer and just did not know how to display it with her tentacles.

However, formulating this system was well beyond his area of expertise. As engineers and programmers tend to not get along very well, he knew very little about computer programming. After a bit of thought, he decided to give up on the idea of studying this central carrier all by himself.

"By the way, I remember that you said the carriers needed mud and heat to continue functioning. Is there any magma here?"

Pasha replied, "Fran hasn't drilled that deep yet, but we've found a boiling underground river here. So we should be able to find lava flow nearby soon. Also, I often smell sulfur from this underground river. It's good for us to take a bath in it, too. As for the central carrier, we pump water from the river to shower her every few days, so you don't need to worry about this."

Hearing that magma was not a must for the carrier and that hot water could be used as a replacement, Roland was excited to think that he would only need a boiler to heat some water for this central carrier if he wanted to move her to the Arithmetic Academy one day.

He knew it was still not the time to make this request, as it would feel like he was overstepping his boundaries with the Taquila witches who had just moved here and had not yet joined the united front with Neverwinter. Besides, he was worried that those astrologers from the academy wouldn't be able to keep their composure once they saw this gigantic tentacle monster.

He would first have to build trust with the witches during the exploration of the snow mountain before he could make this sensitive request.

After Roland left the secret chamber and ended his tour of the Third Border City, he began to contemplate about the plans for

this place. At present, only a rough frame of this underground city had been constructed, and it could only serve as a temporary underground residence for the witches for now. Only after tunnels connected the numerous peaks of the Impassable Mountain Range could they consider this a real hidden stronghold. With the artillery installments and military fortifications above ground, it would then be incorporated into part of Neverwinter's outermost defense line.

As soon as he returned to the castle, he summoned all the department leaders of City Hall to his reception hall. A purple curtain of light slowly materialized in front of them before eventually enveloping the whole room.

Despite the fact that Roland informed them in advance about what they were going to see, the officials' faces still drastically changed when they saw this incredible scene. The young Minister of Agriculture, Sirius Daly, even accidentally knocked over his teacup on the table in shock; Barov kept on wiping the sweat from his forehead; Kyle Sichi and Astrologer of Dispersion Star stared at the light curtain in fearful disbelief. If it had not been for the king who was still sitting calmly in his chair, they probably would have already run away with their tails between their legs.

Roland glanced around and found that the only person who remained relatively calm was the noble lady from the Northern Region, Edith, who only jumped a little from the scene but at the same time her eyes seemed to be filled with excitement and curiosity. He also noticed that she was now looking at him with more respect in her eyes.

He had to admit that trying to figure out women was quite the difficult task.

Aside from Edith, all the other City Hall officials' reactions were within his expectations.

As he was determined to form a united front with the Taquila survivors to fight against the demons, he knew that he could not hide them from the officials forever. Given this, he thought he had better introduce the witches to the officials before anyone in the City Hall noticed something strange in the mountains to the north of Neverwinter.

He also believed that two years of working in the City Hall should have broadened their outlooks and made them more open-minded toward new things.

However, after he explained to them who these tentacle blobs were, why they came here, and how he planned to explore the snow mountain together with them, most officials did not seem to be much supportive at all. If they had not been familiar with the witches in the Witch Union, they would have already treated those ancient witches as alien creatures like the demons.

Barov, the City Hall Director, said that it was too late to come up with new budget plans for this exploration since it was already the time for the Finance Department to work on the final accounts of the year. He also expressed his worries about Border Area's possible vulnerability if they were to dispatch additional troops for this expedition, given how a force was recently just sent to the Southernmost Region.

With an obvious distrust in the Taquila survivors, Chief Knight Carter doubted the safety of this joint action and even argued that dangers might arise due to internal conflicts of the expedition team.

Sirius, Minister of Agriculture, stuttered about how the grains in stock could hardly support this plan alongside the ongoing military expedition and this news about the shortage of food might cause panic among the residents of the city.

Karl, the Minister of Construction, expressed his concerns about the instability of the mining area above the place hollowed out by the ancient witches in the mountain range.

Hearing them giving various reasons for canceling this exploration, Roland was clear that all they were doing was persuading him to think twice before cooperating with those tentacle monsters.

The discussion had become bogged down over this contentious issue.

If this had happened in a place such as a democratic parliament, he would not have been able to carry out his plan.

However, he did not forget that he was the lord of Neverwinter, the king of Graycastle and the one who had the final say in this matter.

He knew that it was now time for him to take over the meeting and forcibly carry out the plan.

Just like he did when he decided to protect the witches in his domain.

Chapter 779: The King's Decision

Roland knocked on the table and everybody in the hall instantly quieted down.

He rose from this chair and paced over to stand behind the officials. "When the Months of Demons end, we'll welcome the new year as the most important year for Graycastle. I'll unify the entire kingdom and hold the coronation ceremony to officially become the king and you'll all become my ministers to help me govern this country. "

Two years ago, everyone would have considered Roland's promises to be the crazy ravings of an arrogant prince.

One year ago, they would have thought that his plans were long-term goals.

However, today, no one doubted what he said.

All officials rose and placed their right hands on their chest almost simultaneously. They lowered their heads and said, "Your Majesty, it's our honor!" Suddenly, all their complaints and doubts disappeared. They looked excited as they understood the power of Neverwinter after working these two years in City Hall.

They knew, for sure, that once His Majesty made up his mind to unify the whole kingdom, he would definitely bring all the regions and areas of the kingdom into his control.

When that happened, they would rise from the officials of a city to the most powerful ministers of a kingdom.

Roland made a gesture, indicating them to sit down and said, "It's more than that. My Graycastle will become unprecedentedly large. My kingdom will include the Hermes Plateau in the north, reach the Endless Cape in the south, expand westward to the Barbarian Land, and eastward to the Fjord Islands."

He further explained, "To make that happen, the First Army will become the busiest department and thus leave fewer soldiers to guard Neverwinter. Given this, I've got to explore the snow mountain now to eliminate hidden threats to the city. I don't want my king's city to be attacked by some unknown enemies from the mountains when the main force of the First Army isn't here."

Carter suggested to the king in a low voice, "Your Majesty, maybe the First Army and the Witch Union will be enough to explore the snow mountain..."

Roland interrupted, "No, in a dark underground cave where the landscape is extremely complex, guns and cannons have only a limited effect. We don't have any maps of the cave or any preset firing position there. If they happen to meet some demonic hybrids, how much do you think it will cost the First Army to defeat them?"

The Chief Knight fell into silence at once.

"This is why we must work together with the Taquila survivors. Their God's Punishment Witches and the Witch Union have complementary advantages in this exploration. The First Army will set sentry posts along the way and cover their retreat if need be. This is the most prudent arrangement." Roland paused and then suddenly raised his voice. "You all listen to me carefully. Don't tell me it's difficult to implement this plan. You're sitting here to solve problems for me! If you can't, my City Hall doesn't need you anymore!"

He paused and looked at the City Hall Director. "Barov Mons?"

Barov shuddered, answering, "Yes, Your Majesty!"

"Is there any problem with the final accounts and logistics for the exploration?"

"No... I believe." The old man wiped the sweat from his face. "I'll give you a plan five days later."

"Three days," Roland corrected him with an air of authority. After that, he turned to look at Minister of Agriculture. "Sirius Daly?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"If Border Area's food stocks are low, you can get some from the Longsong Area. We've got enough concrete boats for this. Do I make myself clear?"

"Ye-Yes, Your Majesty!"

"Karl Van Bate!"

The Minister of Construction answered immediately, "Your Majesty, I'll carefully check the geological condition of both the mining and furnace areas."

"Good..." Roland smiled. "Then the next one."

...

This time, all the problems could be readily solved since all the officials saw the king's determination and accepted the tasks without any hesitation.

After assigning the tasks to the officials, it was time to decide who would go for the exploration.

Pasha's voice resounded in everyone's head again. Most of the officials got scared again, but as soon as they saw Roland calmly talking to the tentacle monster, they calmed down a little and did not flee the hall in panic.

Since they had already promised His Majesty to work with the Taquilla witches, they thought that all they needed to do at this moment was force themselves to remain seated and listen to the

voice. To avoid seeing the tentacle monster, they all closed their eyes and lowered their heads, pretending that they were engrossed in their thoughts. They acted as if the sound was some evil spell from the hell instead of a female voice.

Seeing them, Roland did not know whether to laugh or cry.

Edith was the only official who dared to look at the light curtain.

Sometimes, she even tried to talk with the Senior Witches of Taquila like Roland did.

Not wanting to be upstaged by his opponent, Barov managed to lift up his head several times but failed to say anything in the end.

Roland had expected this and had planned to not get the City Hall officials heavily involved in the conversation.

At last, the Taquila witches agreed to send 50 God's Punishment Witches to team with the Witch Union and these witches were the main force for the exploration. The First Army would send a group of 500 soldiers with Brian as their commander to join this exploration as well.

The remaining troops in the city would be temporarily handed over to Carter and continue to fight against the demonic beasts at the border.

When both parties agreed on these arrangements and Roland was

about to end this meeting, Edith suddenly raised her hand.

"Your Majesty, I wish to apply to join the Snow Mountain Exploration Team and go to the Western Region snow mountains together with the First Army soldiers."

Barov's mouth corner twisted, saying, "Come on, you're not a witch or a soldier. Don't mess up His Majesty's plan."

She insisted, "I used to serve as a fencing coach in a knight battalion and defeated each of my opponents including demonic beasts within five rounds. I can protect myself."

Roland asked curiously, "What's the reason for this request?"

Edith explained, "The Battle of Divine Will is getting closer to us, but none of the officials sitting here know what the demons or the underground creatures look like. As we know nothing about our opponents in the upcoming war, I'm afraid that the City Hall won't be able to reach Your Majesty's expectations. I know that someone may think that since the First Army will fight against the demons, his own department won't get involved into the war-related stuff. However, once the battle begins, all the departments such as the Ministry of Construction and the Ministry of Agriculture will have to satisfy the needs of the war effort. This is inevitable and so to do a great job in City Hall, we also have to know our enemies well."

"You..." The City Hall Director wanted to retort but did not know what to say at this moment.

Roland could not help smiling, thinking that what she said might sound a little belligerent but was quite interesting. He also derived an inspiration from her statement and thought it might make a great new rule that only allowed promotion of the officials who had worked in the cities located on or near the front line during the battle. In this way, he could guarantee that the officials of the City Hall would never underestimate the importance of this fatal war or make some unrealistic government decrees during wartime.

Besides, he believed that it would be alright to let Edith join the First Army's action as she indeed had battle experience.

He nodded to the Pearl of the Northern Region.

"Well, please go get ready for the exploration."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Edith smoothed back her hair that was hanging beside her ears and bowed with a smile.

Chapter 780: Edith's Little Game

"Sister, are you... going to some place far away?" Cole Kant's voice could be heard from behind Edith.

She continued sorting out her clothes without turning her head back to her brother. "Not very far away. I'll just hang around somewhere in the Western Region."

He came to her side and asked again, "How long will it take?"

"I don't know."

Cole started to look at the clothes piled on his sister's bed. "You didn't pick any formal dress, girdle or your favorite corset... Aren't you going to visit some nobles or attend banquets?"

Edith gave him a quick glance. "You've got stronger observation power now, but you don't always have to tell the others everything you notice."

The boy winced at once and said, "You were the one who taught me how to improve my observation ability."

"Now I'll teach you another thing. When you're talking to a woman, remember to remain graceful all the time and choose your words carefully, understand?"

"But you're my sister..."

"If I wasn't, you would suffer a lot."

Cole shuddered and said, "I, I see."

"Good." Edith shrugged. "How do you feel working in City Hall?"

"It's alright... Just like you instructed, I've never revealed my identity as a noble. All I do there is just writing and recording, which are easy for me. But I really don't understand..." He hesitated. "Why didn't you put me in your department?"

Since Cole Kant had watched the artillery drill, he had given up the idea of returning to the City of Evernight. He and Edith had also moved from the Foreign Affairs Building to a spacious house near the lord's castle. Now they were official residents of Neverwinter. As a noble who had received a traditional education, Cole had found a job easily in City Hall. Including the hundred or so scholars and servants from the Northern Region, Edith managed to gain a certain status there.

These people would not stay here forever, but she knew that His Majesty would never reject more people from the Northern Region coming to learn the new system. The young king was thirsty for talents, and now the Northern Region was the only one that was willingly providing him with talented people. As long as her father kept on sending new people here, she would always keep her status in the new system of the king.

Edith smiled and answered Cole, "Because it's not necessary and it may cause us troubles. The City Hall Director always keeps an eye on me. If I put you in my department and he manages to find out your mistakes, I'll be faced with a dilemma. If we ruin the Kant family's reputation, it'll influence His Majesty's opinion of me." She paused for a moment and continued. "Even if we don't get along with each other, the others will still think of us as a whole as we share a common surname. So no matter what you do in the future, you've got to remember you represent the whole family, not just yourself."

The boy looked down with a contemplative expression on his face. Edith did not know how much he could understand, but she had said all there was to be said about this matter. Even when the feudal aristocratic order was totally replaced by Roland's new system, their family reputation would still have a long-term influence on them and might even draw more attention to them in the short run.

Their common surname had replaced their noble identities to become the most important thing for them now, just like the way the moon became the brightest thing in the sky after the sunset.

After quite a long while, he nodded and said, "I'll be careful."

Their father had said that Cole was timid, irresolute and weak, therefore not a suitable heir for the Kant Family. He was worried that this son would not be strong enough to lead his knights to guard the domain as a lord, and if it was wartime, his style would easily put him in an invidious position.

Edith knew another point that the duke had never mentioned.

Cole Kant took after his father in personality.

If Timothy had never planned to ally with some less powerful noble in the Northern Region to break the existing order there, the Kant family would not have been able to get where they were today.

Now that they were no longer a lesser noble family in some remote place of the Northern Region, their father thought a more capable child, Edith, was a better successor and thus had great expectations of her.

However, Edith was clear that Cole's shortcomings were not going to hold him back in Neverwinter. On the contrary, being prudent, introverted and a fast learner meant that he would adapt well to the job in City Hall.

The moment she had known that a group of common people with snow powder weapons in hands had captured Timothy's city in merely one day, she had realized that personal strength and courage were not that important as before. This was also why she had insisted on keeping her brother in Neverwinter to learn new things.

Cole casually picked up a long dress and lifted it in front of him, acting as if he were checking whether it fitted him or not. He asked, "Oh, sister. Where're you going indeed? I don't want to stay in such a large house alone. I'll get bored."

"But it was you who asked me to buy a big house. It's five hundred gold royals, which is quite expensive even for me. Now you think it's too big?" Edith asked him in a cold voice.

The boy was startled and almost dropped the dress on the ground. "No... no... I'm very satisfied with this house."

"Wait until next summer. Our little brother will come here to keep you company." She glanced at him and found that the dress seemed to suit him well. "As for where I'm going, it's a secret of Neverwinter, but it's not something I can't tell you. According to the old rules, you have to pay a price for this."

Cole hesitated, as he was familiar with this little game and had been tricked into doing many silly things this way. However, in the end, his uncontrollable curiosity still took over his fear. He said to Edith, "I want to know."

She smiled and said, "I'll go to the Great Snow Mountain of the Western Region with some soldiers from the First Army."

He was surprised and asked, "You mean the source of the Redwater River? Is there anything special?"

"Some unknown demonic hybrid monsters or alien species. We'll probably meet anything there." Edith said and then continued to describe the Taquila witches she had seen during the meeting. "Now we've entered into an alliance with those tentacle monsters. I can't wait to witness our monster allies fighting against the

monster enemies."

Cole listened with his mouth agape and then stuttered, "Wait... wait... Aren't you afraid of those things? And His Majesty made a deal with some monsters? Even the demons don't look that scary, do they?"

"So?" She threw up her hands and said. Not seeming to care much about her brother's worries, she continued to ask, "Isn't it a good thing for us?"

He could not believe what he had heard and asked, "A good thing? Sister, are you crazy?"

"What?"

"No, I mean..."

Edith sighed and explained, "Do you remember what we want to achieve by serving the king here?"

Cole replied with great care, "To achieve... greater power?"

She looked at him with shining eyes and said, "Not exactly, but at least it's not wrong. Greater power comes from a bigger domain and a larger population. If the ancient witches, some alien species and even the demons all rush to the king's side, the power of this kingdom will extend from the human world to some alien lands. Do you understand?"

He gasped at what she had said.

She continued and said, "A lesser noble who owns just a village can easily remember the names of all his subjects, but a lord of a city can never do that. The diversity of the people in a domain indicates how vast the domain is... and I remember no king had ruled over any alien species in the history. This is the new opportunity our family wants to seek. We left the remote and backward domain for this, so why are you worried about it?"

Hearing this, Cole stood at the place for quite a long while before he could open his mouth and said, "But..."

Edith interrupted. "But they're not our kind. That's what you want to say, right?" She twitched her mouth and continued. "As long as His Majesty is still at the helm, he will be able to do whatever he wants with those alien creatures."

Her words made him sense a chill in this warm room.

"Now, it's time for you to pay back." With her eyes squinted, Pearl of the Northern Region pointed at the long dress and said with an affected drawl. "Put it on and let me have a look."

Chapter 781: Sand Road, Wolf Heart

This was a long dream.

A dream that Lorgar knew she was in.

The moment the Four-winged Eagle landed on her, the pain of the broken bones in her legs coursed through her veins. Her legs were, in her view, as crushed as the wheat under the millstone, in which she had seen her clansmen process food purchased from the north in spite of her lack of knowledge of how to grow wheat.

There was no way for her to stand up again for the rest of her life, not to mention fight.

But now she was standing.

Thus, it had to be a dream.

For only in a dream, what was made could be unmade.

Taking a deep breath, Lorgar looked into the space before her, where a sand road started from her feet and stretched as far as she could see. She stepped forward and, from time to time, she would encounter an opponent, one of those that she had defeated before, walking towards her with neither a hint of laughter nor mockery. One by one, they passed by her and disappeared into the endless sand behind her.

A sandworm was the first to come.

It was her achievement in her first hunt when she was 12 years old.

The sandworm would be most vulnerable when it was moving in the sand and leaving a clear trail, but once it was skulking in silence, it would be hard for the hunter to spot it. However, that could not baffle the civilians of Sand Nation, who might be more deceitful than any other creature in the desert. Lorgar attempted to disguise herself as a common bush and wait for the sandworm to come. By the time it was close enough, she shoved her spike into the sand as well as the sandworm beneath it.

Her excellent hunting performance had exceeded her siblings and even in the big clans of the Iron Sand City, was unmistakable. As a consequence of that hunt, she fell in love with the happy feeling of confronting and fighting.

The sandworm coming now did not take the cover of sand but raised its head as it traveled slowly in the sand like a snake. For a moment, Lorgar thought it would spit venom at her that would deform her face, but nothing happened. It went by quietly.

A Scorpion and a Desert Wolf came next... her second and third opponent.

The Scorpion passed by, but the Desert Wolf stopped, who, after a moment of hesitation, walked up to her, wagging its tail. It snuffed her calloused bare feet before turning around and walking

by her side.

Lorgar recalled the brutal challenge between her and the wolf. Constrained by the fact that much more effort was required for a Mojin woman to be a qualified duelist, she had to seek for the next prey right after the hunt of many sandworms and scorpions. She aimed at the wolf pack.

But the wolves moving in packs were more fearful than she had thought. A sandstorm had struck them and untied the hunting team. By the time it subsided, numerous wolves emerged on the horizon.

The Sand Nation people hemmed in by wolves had fought valiantly, but they were outnumbered. One by one, they fell under the sharp claws and fangs coming from all around. Lorgar had thought she was doomed. At the last moment, a sharp pain took her and then she awakened to be a Divine Lady.

She became the giant King of Wolfheart.

Standing on the sand that was soaked in blood, she looked down at the wolves, whoever met her eyes huddled down, as if they were greeting their dominating God.

The road after her awakening turned much broader.

As strong performers of her age, clan fighters, and battle-tested warriors... approached her one after another and disappeared.

Lorgar's heart tensed.

Perhaps the dream would come to an end when the last opponent passed by her.

There was not much time left for her.

She wanted to slow down... but it did not help.

Soon the earth darkened as if something large was passing over her head. Lorgar looked up and saw the Four-winged Eagle.

The last moment was coming.

At the same time, with a shaking roar, the Desert Wolf broadened its muscles and jumped at that sky-dominating beast.

The two beasts collided hard, sending blood and feathers all around. They fought their best as if wanting to finish the duel on the Burning Stage that had not played out yet.

Lorgar held her breath and gazed at her last battle. Her body would precisely record every feeling during the fight, which was exactly the reason why she could improve much more rapidly than ordinary people. If she got the chance to fight the beast again, it was certain that she could persevere longer and even snap its head before Ashes lent a hand.

What a pity that the opportunity was beyond her grasp.

As the battle was reaching fever pitch, Lorgar wanted to join and fight alongside the giant wolf, but her body was stiff and she even lost the feeling in her feet.

She realized it was time to wake up.

The fear grasped her heart and she began trembling all over.

She did not want to be confined to a bed, disabled.

She wanted to stand up!

To continue to fight!

However, she felt increasingly confined. The feeling had crept from her legs to her neck and she could not even manage to move her throat now.

Suddenly, the Desert Wolf howled agonizingly from the pain of its torn abdomen ripped open by the eagle. Its intestines poured out as it faltered to Lorgar. The wolf only managed to move a few steps before its last strength evaporated and it fell in Lorgar's direction. Even at the last moment of its life, it attempted to block the rest of the strikes from the enemy for her.

The strikes on its back were like the beats on her heart.

No!

Lorgar abruptly opened her eyes and sat up.

The sand road and the beasts were suddenly all gone. Beside her came the cry of her maid, "Princess... you, you woke up!"

"Yes..." She was in a trance for a while. "I woke up."

"Which means the time I can stand is... Wait!" Lorgar was bewildered. She could clearly see the maid approaching her bedside in panic and feel the touch of the towel on her skin when the maid wiped her sweat. In her sight, the roof of the old tent, the knife hanging on the wall, and the burning brazier were all incredibly vivid.

But how could she capture such a clear vision with only one eye?

Subconsciously, she touched her left eye... To her surprise, it was intact.

No, not just the eyes, both of her arms were good and her entire body was painless, even her feet!

Throwing back the covers, she scrambled out of bed and stood with both her feet on the ground firmly.

"What?" She looked at the maid who had been shocked by her behavior.

"The new Divine Lady brought by the northerners healed you," the maid stuttered, trying to explain. "She didn't even use any medicine. With a slight touch of her hands, your wound healed over."

"There's a witch called Nana in Neverwinter of Graycastle, who can heal anybody, even someone who's breathing his last or whose limbs are entirely broken."

So what Ashes had said was not to comfort her, but was real. There indeed was a witch who possessed such a miraculous power.

"Where are they now?" Lorgar quickly slipped on a coat and asked, "I have to thank her."

"They've gone."

"What?" She frowned. "What about Ashes?"

"She's not in the Iron Sand City either. Two days ago, the Osha clan took the first batch of Sand Nation people to the Southern Territory."

"Is she..." the Wolf Girl slowed down. "How long have I been out?"

Timidly, the maid held up three fingers and then added three.

"Six days. What a long dream." She sighed. "Is there anything else that happened in the Iron Sand City during that period?"

"Yes, the Wildwave clan annexed the severely buffeted Black River clan and challenged us..." The girl looked a little depressed. "Lord Chief didn't, didn't take the challenge, but gave up directly. The rank of Wildflame has dropped to third... We couldn't keep the Stone Castle any longer."

"Really?" Lorgar raised her eyebrows. "I need to see my father."

"Ah... Wait My Princess, you forgot your hood and cloak!" The maid followed Lorgar to the doorway with some clothes. "Many people have come to the castle recently, some coming for negotiation, some for..." Her voice lowered as she spoke.

"Driving us out, right?" Lorgar reached out her hand to touch her pointed ear and then smiled at the maid. "Keep them, for I no longer need them."

"What? But..."

Her father had told her to conceal her unique unhuman-like features before she succeeded the chief, for even a Divine Lady would be excluded and mistrusted for an abnormal look. But she had understood what she really wanted after finishing the long

sand road in her dream.

Half woman and half beast? A Monster?

That did not prevent her from continuing her fight, did it?

Lorgar waved her hand, giving no more words, she then walked directly towards the top floor of the Stone Castle.

Chapter 782: Say Goodbye

Along the way, she witnessed her clansmen coming and going with bags on their backs, their sad faces displayed an obvious reluctance to leave their homes.

Since their ranks had dropped down to third, they would be distributed to the much smaller houses of Stone Castle. It would be even worse for the people who were no longer be eligible to live in the castle. They were going to be moved to the campsite in the outer street. Even though it belonged to the Iron Sand City, it would be inconvenient when compared to the central area.

After all, the big clans Stone Castles controlled the limited pieces of land around the lakes and oases.

Lorgar etched their expressions in her mind and stored it in her heart.

As the guard stationed outside her father's bedroom saw Lorgar coming, he couldn't help but smile. "Princess, you... are healed!"

"Yeah, as good as I was," Lorgar joked. "Is my father in his room?"

"Lord Chief is always in there, however..." The guard hesitated. "He is not alone."

She had an idea who they might be so she didn't bother asking.

That's when she heard the sounds of an argument coming from behind the closed door.

"I thought we settled this already. Your clan would vacate the main castle within three days. So, why are you still here?" someone inquired loudly. "Are you defying the vow of the Three Gods?"

"Mind your attitude, Kabucha!" a voice chastised. If she had correctly identified it, the voice belonged to her oldest brother Rohan. "Now that you've absorbed the Black River clan, you should make them vacate, so we can move in. We can't share a space with them while they are still mourning their loss, they still have white linens hanging on the walls."

"You can send your men in to tear down the linen. Our Lord Chief wants results, not your excuses."

"You—!"

"Ha, since your clan conceded during the holy duel, you shouldn't bother trying to be arrogant. Your chief still hasn't spoken and yet you dare to criticize us? Stay out of the way and be quiet."

Others started to join in, "Exactly, accept the results or we can defeat you again!"

"Cang—"

Subsequently, the sound of swords being unsheathed rang out.

Just as the guard outside the room drew his weapon to join the fight, Lorgar stopped him.

"Leave it to me."

"But..." The guard murmured as he attempted to argue. However, his next words were quelled by Lorgar's peremptory gaze, he lowered his head as he replied, "I understand, My Princess."

Lorgar pushed open the door and walked in, her face sullen.

The warriors of the Wildwave clan stood with their arms crossed, defiant, as they ignored the sharp blades near their throats, betting that the Wildflame clan wouldn't dare to swing them.

The warriors had guessed right. Both, her brother and the guards, only dared to threaten harm, making the Wildflame look weaker.

Guelz Burnflame was seated behind a square table and his eyes reflected the rooms unsettled flames. Momentarily, the room was silenced.

"Stow your weapons."

Lorgar's voice broke the tension.

Guelz smiled, "Finally, you're awake."

"Sister, you... are... no, I mean... this is great!" Rohan sputtered in disbelief as she approached them. At first, Lorgar wasn't able to read her brother expression. She couldn't tell if he was shocked or surprised.

Lorgar suddenly realized that her father hadn't told anyone about the Divine Lady of the North. Only her father and those who had cared for her knew, the rest still remained ignorant.

Even her brother was surprised, not to mention the Wildwave warriors.

"Lo-Lorgar? Weren't you... badly wounded during the holy duel?"

"It's impossible! I saw clearly with my own eyes that her legs had been crushed and bloodied, as she was carried off the platform!"

"What's that I see... a wolf's ears and tail?"

"She's a monster!"

Lorgar, unmoved, walked over to the Wildwave warriors, who had clearly lost their cool as they continued to argue, "Anyway, Wildflame yielded during the duel on the Burning Stage, which was witnessed by the Three Gods! You have to wait six months before your next challenge."

This rule about participants who yield not being allowed to challenge the winner before six months had passed was a safeguard against planned surrender for the preservation of power and it was well known and accepted throughout the Sand Nation.

"We accepted the results, just like we believe in the Three Gods." Lorgar gave the answer which relieved the tension in warriors chest, unfortunately, it wouldn't last long. What she said next tensed the room up again, "So... who's Kabucha?"

"I am!" the head of the Wildwave warriors had no choice but to step forward. "Now that you have promised to respect the results, move out immediately. You are no longer the strongest clan. Do you really still want to cling to this castle?"

The reply was a right hook to the face.

Kabucha was indeed a good fighter, even so, he wouldn't be able to defeat a wolf claw that had instantly emerged in front of him. He had been blown away, breaking the door, before he landed outside in a crumpled heap.

"You—" The other warriors glared at her, and yet, none of them dared to charge at her.

"Even though Wildflame dropped to the third clan, the dignity of the chief can't be ignored, especially by someone standing in the middle of our land. How dare you be so insolent?" Lorgar accused. "Take that punch as a lesson and get out, all of you!"

The moment Lorgar entered the room, the table had turned. Annexing Blackwater had contributed to a great part of Wildwave's force, so they hadn't feared the holy duel or the possible private challenge, they were confident they would transcend Wildflame. But, when Princess Lorgar of the Wildflame clan appeared before them, in the flesh, their confidence vacated them. They had to admit, even if Wildflame had decided not to duel with them in six months, they still wouldn't be able to afford losses to the giant Desert Wolf, who could sneak up and assault them, from time to time, in the future.

Their day of reckoning would come, for they challenged them in the first place.

For the Sand Nation People, revenge was as sacred as the holy duel.

Wildwave warriors carried the bloody-faced Kabucha and left without a word.

"Father, now that my sister has healed, can we move back to this Stone Castle in six months?" Rohan asked excitedly, his fists clenched. "Or perhaps you could negotiate with the chief of Wildwave and save us from the trouble of moving—since they wouldn't stand a chance in winning the next duel, he should allow you the favor."

"Yes, our Prince is right," the guards echoed in excitement.

"Let me go and stop everyone who is packing."

"Also, don't forget to throw out the Wildwave clansmen who have been lingering in our castle."

"Don't forget to tell them to take their belongings with them."

They prattled on delightedly.

Guelz Burnflame softly coughed and looked at his daughter, "What'd you have in mind?"

That brought silence to the room. Everyone turned their eyes towards Lorgar and waited for her answer. Rohan was among them, slightly biting his lips, his eyes shadowed.

Lorgar barely noticed. She took a deep breath and said clearly, "Father, I want to leave and I'm here to say goodbye."

Chapter 783: Where I Belong

Her words shocked everyone.

"Sister, no... what are you talking about?" Rohan was the first one to recover from the shock. "You want to leave the oasis? What will our clan do without you? How will we deal with the holy duels in the future? Where do you plan to go?"

Lorgar gave no answer. Instead, she looked at her father quietly.

A rueful smile came over Guelz's face. He exhaled a long breath and waved to the others. "Leave us alone."

"Father..." Rohan opened his mouth, trying to say something, but swallowed the words.

The guards were as surprised as Rohan, but respecting the family's privacy, they obeyed the command and left in bewilderment.

Soon Lorgar and Guelz were alone in the room.

"You want to go to the north?" Guelz asked straightforwardly.

"Yes," Lorgar answered honestly without hiding anything. "I'll go to the Southern Territory of Graycastle to find Ashes, and then travel to Neverwinter with her."

"What about the Wildflame clan?"

"Go to the Southern Territory. You can find fresh oases there, without having to fight for food or water." She paused for a moment. "I'll bet that you had already made that decision long ago. That's why you didn't accept the challenge from the Wildwave clan."

Guelz raised his eyebrows, but denied nothing.

Lorgar continued. "It doesn't mean that you're afraid of them. Wildflame has been the strongest clan for decades, even before I turned into a Divine Lady. You would never spare them without making them pay an unforgettable price for their insolence, even if they did surpass us after taking Blackwater. It's this kind of spirit that we have always relied on to hold our ground in the biggest Stone Castles of Iron Sand City."

"The only reason that you wouldn't accept the challenge would be if the holy duel to determine the rank of the clans in Iron Sand City had already become meaningless. Our clansmen may fight and bleed to secure the future of the clan, but you would never let them fight a meaningless battle and die in vain. Am I right, Father?"

Guelz stared at her with a poker face for a long time before curling his lips into a smile. He shook his head and said, "I don't know whether you were born a genius or you have the nose of a wolf. Or maybe both? In fact, I kept putting off the discussion of this matter because I wanted to seek your counsel on our

relocation after you woke up."

"I don't think I truly understand. Besides, I have neither the intelligence nor the wolf's nose you just mentioned. I just have trust in my fists." Lorgar shook her ears.

"Fists?"

"Yeah, I can figure out what kind of a person someone is once we've had a fight. You taught me to fight from a young age, and I've tasted both your punches and your weapons. It's only natural that I can perceive your true intentions."

"I'm so glad to hear that." Guelz laughed. "What about Ashes? Can we trust her?"

"For me, she's as unapproachable as a mountain... but a mountain is always silent and doesn't care enough to lie. She also gave me a feeling of a strength and safety," Lorgar said slowly. "Those under her wings must feel very warm and comfortable."

"I'm relieved to hear you say that." Guelz seemed to have made up his mind. "Since we're all going to the Southern Territory anyway, why don't you wait a few more days and join us?"

"I don't want to wait anymore, Father... I feel my heart beat fiercely when facing the north," Lorgar said, pressing her chest with her hands. "It's urging me to set out as soon as possible. If I get there earlier, I can see whether they really intend to keep their

word to offer every civilian of the Sand Nation an oasis just as they've promised."

"Didn't you just say that you believed in them with all your heart?" Guelz laughed.

"It's Ashes I trust, not the 'Chief' behind her. Ashes may not be lying, but it doesn't mean that she can't be cheated." Lorgar waved her fist. "If the King of Graycastle deceives us, I won't let him stay in peace."

"What if Drow Silvermoon's words are true? Will you swear fealty to him if he treats the Ironsand people of the Mojin clan as well as he does his own people, or even serve him in the same way your mother did?" Guelz asked with great interest. "If all you want to do is to challenge his men for your own entertainment, I'm afraid he won't welcome you."

"I... I won't! Who would be interested in a monster that's half man and half beast?" The short fur on Lorgar's tail bristled and her eyes turned away. "I've heard from Ashes that there are extremely powerful alien enemies there. That's what I'm going for, not to serve the king. I'll pay them myself if I need any cures or treatment from the witches."

The chief of Wildflame stopped teasing her and waved at her. "Come over here. Let me have a good look at you."

Lorgar walked up to her father and sat down, placing her head on her father's lap as she always did.

Guelz gently stroked her hair and fluffy ears, whispering, "You'll be back, won't you?"

"Yeah." Lorgar closed her eyes. "If the people of Graycastle people can come to Iron Sand City, then so can I. It'll also be easier for me to pay a visit after our people move to the Southern Territory, as it'll be closer. If you don't want to be the chief anymore in the future, hand the position over to my brother. He's far more suitable for the position of chief than me. He'll be an excellent leader for when we don't have to constantly fight for the oasis."

"Don't bother yourself with those things at this moment," Guelz said. "Remember to write me some letters even if you don't have time to come back. Since we are going to move to the north, it won't be bad for us learn their ways."

"You can put up with my ugly handwriting?"

"Silly," he grunted. "When our people leave home, they always leave something behind. If you don't want to leave a word, I don't mind keeping your hair."

"Uh... I'll leave a word," Lorgar said, wagging her tail.

...

After night had fallen, Lorgar left Iron Sand City carrying a bag that was much larger than herself.

No one saw her off. There was hardly anyone who knew that the Divine Lady of Wildflame was about to begin her own journey.

Having passed through the small outer oases, she entered the desolate desert, where she looked around to make sure that she was alone before taking off her clothes.

She folded every piece of her clothes neatly and packed them in her bag. After that, she stood up slowly in the cold wind, naked.

But she felt no cold. Instead, she felt an ineffable sensation running throughout through her body—as if a huge invisible hand was caressing her, and the things that bound her and held her down had vanished. She had been renewed in the cold wind.

Fine hair began to grow out of her skin, and her body was expanding. A few seconds later, a huge desert wolf stood in the vast desert.

She raised her head and howled without restraint.

"Ow——Ah——Woo——"

Her howls echoed and lingered in the air above the desert. Lorgar believed that all of the Wildflame clan must have heard her howls.

The heavy bag now looked small and lightweight. She lowered

her head to grab the strap of the bag with her teeth. After confirming the direction she was supposed to go, she began to run towards the Southern Territory of Graycastle.

Chapter 784: Together with Worms

On the last day of midwinter, a scouting team consisting of the Taquila survivors and witches and solders of Neverwinter finally commenced their journey to the western area beyond the Western Region.

Roland stood by the wharf and watched the concrete boat, which carried so many people, slowly depart the dock.

The exploration could be considered as the most complex operation in the history of time, for the First Army, the Witch Union, and the Taquila witches were all going to collaborate and cooperate with each other to conduct a thorough search of the Great Snow Mountain. If everything went well, they would arrive at the headwater of Redwater River in three days. Then, they would pick a sheltered place shielded from winds to erect their tents.

They would first send their vanguard to locate the ruin with the help of Margie's Magic Ark and then use the devouring worm controlled by Fran to open a tunnel in the precipice for the rest of the party to enter the mountain.

This operation was indeed no different than a grave robber's business. Roland was burned with curiosity and was eager to see the ruin of the old civilizations in the Great Snow Mountain. Unfortunately, he was stopped by Wendy and Scroll, who had been insisting on his stay in the castle ever since a demon had thrust a spear through his chest.

Nonetheless, this did not mean that the scouting team would lower their guard. In view of the possible presence of invisible enchanted beasts that had once emerged in Misty Forest, Roland also included Nightingale in the team. It was a big party, so it was practically impossible for Sylvie to attend to the whole team, especially in the event that they had to split up. Meanwhile, the Taquila witches also brought the last three Five-Colored Stone to detect any objects that contained magic power.

According to Pasha, there would be a beam of light at the top of an object that possessed magic power. This theory also held true for demons and hybrid demonic beasts, except that their beams were extremely fine and tiny.

Roland believed his team, constituted of 50 God's Punishment Witch, 500 soldiers from the First Army and a large group of the High Awakened, was definitely an invincible army on the continent. If the operation was successful, it would indubitably lay a solid foundation for the future collaboration among ordinary people, extraordinary warriors, and various witches.

"Let's head back." Roland brushed off the flurries of snow on the nose and said to Anna.

"OK." Anna looked up at him and smiled back.

During the time while Nightingale was away, Anna was responsible for the safety of the king. As Roland and Anna were having an intimate relationship, both of them felt very comfortable to stay close to each other.

Roland held Anna's hand and walked to the castle.

...

He did not, however, expect that Phyllis would be there upon his entry to the hall.

"You didn't go to the Great Snow Mountain with them?" Roland raised his brows. "I thought you would be interested in exploring the underground ruin."

Phyllis replied with a shrug, "I am, but Pasha prefers me to stay here. I know the castle better than anyone else, and most of your men have seen me. If they want to pick a person to take charge of the defense of this castle, I would be the one."

As a matter of fact, the Taquila witches had suggested that one of them should be stationed in the castle. Although Anna was powerful, her magic power would render useless in the vicinity of a God's Stone of Retaliation. Further, Anna presented much more academic talent than combat skills. Once she was stripped of her power, both Roland and Anna would be in a perilous position. In consideration of the potential danger, Pasha insisted that a God's Punishment Witch should stay in the castle to serve as their protector.

Since God's Punishment Witches could manipulate anti-magic areas however they pleased, they could easily vanquish any witches. Their bodies of flesh, which were impervious to any

illness or injuries, allowed them to fight under extreme conditions. Even if their enemies happened to be Extraordinaries, God's Punishment Witches still stood a chance to win.

"Well, then I thank you in advance," Roland naturally replied.

Phyllis gave a nod. "That's my duty. I'll normally stay in the hall. If anything ever happens, I'll come to you as fast as I can."

Roland understood that Phyllis made this decision was to avoid any unnecessary conflicts or suspicions. The ample buffer spaces between the first floor and his office enabled both the protector and the protected to have some privacy without feeling agitated about the awkward presence of the other. It was a delicate balance to keep. If the Taquila witches, on the contrary, demanded the guardian should be in the office, it would only irritate Roland more even if they meant no harm.

Pasha probably had also taken that into account when she had picked Phyllis as the protector, as the latter apparently knew the union witches better than any other God's Punishment Witches.

Nevertheless, Roland would not completely rely on his ally when it came to safety, although the protection from a God's Punishment Witch did greatly reduce risks. He also put some guards and members of the First Army at the staircase at each floor and the bedroom door. They would rotate their shifts every eight hours to make sure nothing would go amiss.

When Roland returned to his office, Scroll was waiting for him

by the French window.

"Your Majesty," Scroll dipped in a perfect curtsy and handed him a report. "I've confirmed Lily's derivative skill."

"Really?" Roland's eyes lightened up. He immediately took the report and started to carefully read it.

Winter was almost close to its end. Although it was still the Months of Demons, most of the witches had peacefully made their way through their Days of Awakening. Among them, Lily was the most special one. Her magic power had entered its "adulthood" a week ago.

Like what he had done for Lucia, Roland had also spent the Day of Adulthood together with Lily. Apart from a substantial increase in her magic power, Lily also found there was something new in her ability which she felt delighted to see.

Without a doubt, Lily was lucky. On the day she had entered her adulthood, she had also attained her derivative skill.

However, Lily encountered some difficulties in understanding her derivative skill. Unlike the main ability, a derivative skill was usually more subtle and thus harder to perceive. Witches did not sense their derivative skills as easily as they did their main abilities. In fact, it had taken Scroll two years to learn how to utilize the Book of Magic after the entry to her adulthood.

But this was not a big problem. According to Agatha, to overcome this obstacle, witches only needed to practice their main abilities over and over again and thereby slowly searched for the solution.

Few witches would obtain a derivative skill entirely irrelevant with her main ability. The relationship between the main ability and a derivative skill was analogous to that of roots and twigs and leaves. Derivative skills could, to some extents, supplement and strengthen the main ability. Sylvie's ability to distinguish magic power and Soraya's painting brush were both solid proofs of this theory.

Roland was surprised by the report. "Is she now able to absorb a parent population into her body and keep it in there?"

Scroll inclined her head. "Not only one. It was actually an accidental discovery made by Lily when she did her experiment. She found some assimilated parent populations enter her body and remain in there ever since. She thought they would disappear once she summons parent populations again, but in reality... they could still get out of her body upon her call and continue to assimilate other microscopic creatures."

Roland soon realized what that meant. After the second evolution, the little girl had learned to turn parent populations she had seen into some specific microscopic creatures. Now, her new derivative skill simplified the matter. Lily did not need to actually "see" parent populations on the spot, but simply needed to "remember" them. In other words, she could collect converted parent populations aforetime and released microscopic worms when needed. Her new skill largely accelerated the assimilation

process.

Roland could envision, with the enhancement of the accuracy of microscopes and the increase in the parent population types Lily carried, Lily would eventually become a walking "biochemical bomb".

Roland was amused by the notion that a harmless assistant witch, after receiving continuous education in Neverwinter, had, in the end, become a combat witch who carried a potentially lethal weapon. He felt both lucky and relieved that Lily at least belonged to the Witch Union. He just wondered, however, if demons would ever get sick or infected by any diseases.

Chapter 785: An Intruder

After Scroll withdrew, there was nobody in the office except him and Anna.

Roland opened the half-completed textbook, planning to finish the latter half, but words seemed to elude him. For a long time, his quill in the air, he did not write a single word.

Roland noticed that he always involuntarily looked in Anna's direction, as though his eyes were glued to her.

"What's the matter?" Sensing his gaze, Anna put down the parts she was working on and smiled at Roland.

"No, nothing." Roland slightly shook his head. "If you feel bored here, we can go to the backyard of the North Slope Mountain."

Anna curled up her lips into an imperceptible smile. "I don't feel bored at all. I can finish the work here. Most importantly, I don't mind where I am as long as I can be with you."

These words might bring the color to a maid's cheeks, but they just came out of Anna so naturally.

"Alright." Smiling, Roland dropped the matter.

He knew Anna would never lie to him.

As Anna was the first witch with whom he got acquainted after coming to this world, Roland knew her quite well. Apart from a few academic discussions and pillow talks, most of the time Anna was quiet and poised, particularly when she was focused on her work. Roland did not think her a dull person in the least. Silence, to them, was also one means of communication.

Sometimes, a simple, occasional eye contact was sufficient enough for them to understand each other.

Roland decided to forget about the textbook for the time being. He put down the quill and started to study Anna's face.

Her side face always fascinated him. Her ash brown hair, which had grown quite a bit, tumbled down, revealing only a tiny bit of her milky-white neck. The azure in her eyes was as clear as lake water as ever. She was dressed in a puffy, pastel yellow sweater and a pair of comfy black flannel pants, looking dainty and airy. Roland was happy that he designed these modern apparels himself.

Since Anna had sliced the metal ingots (whose composition had undergone a precise modification) into palm-sized cubes beforehand, she would only need to process them with Blackfire in the office once they were delivered to the castle. Roland was impressed by how fast those metal ingots be converted to complete parts in Blackfire. To some extents, the conversion was more a performance of art than a plain demonstration of Anna's ingenious techniques and skills.

These little parts, which appeared to be so insignificant, would eventually be delivered to the plant and become one of the key parts of a machine or a weapon.

It was definitely not an easy task. Roland knew very well that the length and the width of the Blackfire were both needed to be controlled by Anna's magic power. To summon several Blackfires and direct them to cut from different angles would be even harder than using both hands to work on two separate tasks simultaneously. It required incredibly high concentration. Probably, only a person as hard-working as Anna was able to continuously dedicate to and eventually excel in this job.

The girl, who used to practice fire manipulation in the castle garden, had undoubtedly changed a lot, but there seemed to be something still remaining the same.

The day slipped away unnoticed.

After night fell when Roland sank into a slumber with Anna in his arms, the other world just woke up.

...

Yawning, Roland turned to the calendar on his nightstand.

It was Saturday, October 14.

Although time went much faster in the dream world than that in

the real world, Roland did not come to this world every night. As long as he was not dreaming, time was frozen here.

Breakfast was ready when Roland entered the living room

"Why are you so late today?" Zero asked while chewing a fried dough stick.

"It's a weekend. Grown-people have their nightlife, so it's normal for me to sleep in." Roland went into the bathroom and picked up his mug and toothbrush. "Are you going out later?"

"No, I'm writing my homework," the little girl replied. Then she said to him as much as to herself, "Nightlife? Come back home even earlier than me yet talk about nightlife. This old grumpy man is nothing but a loser with no friend or career..." Roland knew Zero said it on purpose, for the mumble was just loud enough for him to hear.

He almost choked on his mouthwash. Roland was very displeased to hear Zero call him "uncle", now his title had directly skipped to an old grumpy man? He looked himself in the mirror. His appearance was not so much different than in the real world. By the look, he could be no more than 23 or 24 years old. Although not splendidly attired, wearing only an undershirt and shorts, he could not be considered as a "loser" or an "old grumpy man" by any means.

Roland blamed the child's poor judgment.

He decided not to argue with the little girl but simply said, "In that case, I'll leave my key here. I need to go out later, and you should open the door for me."

"Got it!"

By the time he brushed his teeth and washed his face, Zero had finished her breakfast and retired to her room.

Roland waddled to the table and turned on the TV with the remote.

He needed to meet Garcia today.

Within several months, he had pretty much obtained all the necessary textbooks and materials and had shoveled them to the bedroom. The only work left for him now was to copy them. However, the search for other memory fragments met some obstacles.

No tenant in the Apartment of Souls was willing to let out his room. To this date, Roland had only persuaded two tenants, but there was nothing valuable behind the Gate of Memory. There were over 2,000 residents in the apartment, but it was hard for Roland to collect large capitals just by selling armors, for armors are no real antiques. His act would probably raise as much attention from the police as he broke into someone's residence.

After a full reflection, Roland concluded there were only two

possible ways: one was to increase his revenues and the other his reputation.

If he could be as distinguished as Garcia around Tongzi Street, he could then easily persuade his neighbors to move or rent his apartment. If he became financially capable, another solution would be purchasing the whole building.

Either way was a big investment, and currently, the more feasible way to access such big funds seemed to be joining in the Martialist Association.

According to Garcia, anyone who participated in hunting Fallen Evils would receive competitive compensation. If a skillful and powerful martialist was willing to partake in the operation, the association would give him full support. When Garcia mentioned about the remuneration, however, she looked quite contemptuous, as if she slew Fallen Evils just to protect human beings rather than for the money.

Roland spoke highly of her valor and gallantry. He then inquired about the detailed rules pertaining to the rewards.

If truth be told, Roland felt this organization, which boasted of responsibilities and personal dedication, sounded quite fishy. He somehow tasted conspiracies and shady underground business. Given that, he felt reluctant to work for them, and certainly would not work for them for free. He decided to be a member of the Martialist Association simply because this was his last hope after numerous fruitless, vain undertakings over the past few months.

When it was 10 o' clock, Roland put on a suit and took off. Although they were going to meet up in Room 0827, Roland felt it advisable to be formally dressed since this was, after all, an official application.

But no sooner had he stepped out of the room than he heard a screeching child's scream behind him.

It was from Zero.

The shriek apparently startled Roland. He turned around and found the little girl dash out of the room, frightened and unnerved.

"What's the matter? Is there a mouse?"

Zero stammered out, "There, there's someone in the room."

"Someone?" Roland frowned and poked his head into Room 0825. He instantly stood rooted to the ground.

In the center of the living room, which had been empty just a minute ago, stood an unknown woman.

Chapter 786: The First Dreaming Experience

The woman had tawny long hair, her side-swept bangs clipping to one side, revealing half of her forehead. She had soft facial features, giving Roland an impression that the woman had a gentle and delicate character. Yet under the current circumstances, her exquisite beauty did not strike Roland but actually gave rise to his increasing suspicion of her being a ghost.

Apart from that, Roland also noticed that her gown was a little too shabby. A few stitches were coming out, and the cuffs and corners of the garment were torn and ragged, as though it were picked up from a waste station.

"I, I heard you go out, so I wanted to check if the door was properly locked. When I turned around, however, I saw she was standing there!" Zero was ghastly pale, evidently terrified by the event.

The woman seemed to also notice the commotion. As she raised her head and looked at the door, her expression changed abruptly.

Roland curled his hand into a fist in secret. He was ready to take the blow.

But what the woman said next completely blew his mind. The woman uttered an exclamation of surprise. "Your... Majesty?"

What?

Your Majesty?

"Um... you're..." Roland tried to figure out what had actually happened.

"I'm Phyllis, Your Majesty. What's happened here?" The woman was as puzzled as he.

"Phyllis?" Roland revolved a multitude of thoughts and questions in his mind rapidly "Is she the God's Punishment Witch in the castle hall? Why would she intrude his dream? Is this dream world now opening up and connecting to the other world? Where's Anna? Why hasn't she appeared?"

"Hold on, you know each other?" Zero realized something was wrong here. "What does she mean by 'Your Majesty'... Are you role-playing now?"

"Ahem, she's a... remote relative of mine." Roland suddenly realized that it was not the time for him to stand in a daze. "As to the way she addresses me, it was just a jape. We grew up together and it's normal that she comes up with some particular names."

"A relative?" Hearing that the woman was not some random ghost, the little girl soon slipped back to her usual bold, defiant manner. She started to become more skeptical as well. "You just asked who she was."

Utterly unabashed, Roland shot back, "Did I? I only saw a crying craven who almost wetted her pants."

Zero reddened to her temples. "You, you liar!"

"Didn't you just shriek? This lady was in the room earlier. You were just too occupied with your homework in your bedroom to notice her."

To Roland's dismay, the woman soon took the implication. "Sorry, I... I didn't mean to startle you. I was in another room when His Majesty was leaving. I was about to say hello when you cried out and rushed out of the room."

Roland put a final touch to their improvised show. "I guess that was it. She asked what had happened. The truth is that you scared her. If I find a little girl scream like crazy when I get out, I'll be as confused as she was."

"I... I..." Zero groped for words that did not come. She could not deny the fact that she did scream, for she was not in a habit of lying. Caught in such a dilemma, the little girl felt her eyes moist with tears.

Roland realized that was a bit too much for the little girl to bear, so he bent over and ruffled her hair. "Anyway, it was a miscommunication. Go back to study now."

He could not help feeling a twinge of guilt for Zero because he knew a child like her could not possibly see through the intricacies of guiles and subterfuges deployed by adults. Her life would only be complete after experiencing deception and lies of grown people, as this was an inevitable step, a ceremony she must receive, to inaugurate her adulthood and become mentally mature.

Roland had thought Zero would run into her bedroom in tears, but she actually sniffed and dried her eyes quickly before kicking him hard in his legs. "Uncle, you such a jerk!" With these words, she rushed back to her room in a fury.

Roland twitched his lips. Her reaction was a little different from what he had anticipated, but... overall, she had learned the lesson.

"Haha." The woman who called herself Phyllis burst into laughter. "It seems you aren't those common people's mighty king here."

"But I'm the creator and ruler of this world." Roland gestured the woman to come in. "Let's talk inside. I also have a lot of questions to ask you."

...

After half an hour, Roland was finally convinced that the woman was Phyllis.

She not only talked about Taquila but also about what she had

experienced in the castle, as well as the fact that she used to disguise as a guide in "Black Money" under the name "No. 76". Moreover, she further corroborated her story by disclosing some details Roland had not been very clear about.

It was impossible to develop such a well-organized and logically consistent narrative by simply reading his memory. Roland was thus certain that the woman was not a sentient being automatically formed in this world.

Plus, the current body presented to him was exactly what Phyllis originally looked like.

Then the question was very clear.

Why would she enter this dream world?

Phyllis shook her head. "I don't really know either... It was pretty late at that time. The First Army just changed their shift. I was going to disconnect my body and have some deep sleep to restore my strength. When I woke up, I was here." She paused for a moment and then continued, "You call it... a dream world?"

"Correct. This is a world operating only in my dream, but I don't know if this rule still applies now." Roland felt there was no need to hold anything back from her at the moment, for he had to find out the reason why Phyllis could enter his dream as soon as possible. Although Roland knew this complicated world did not exist in his head, it was still... pretty shocking to see someone come uninvited. After all, he was positive that the dream world was

created precisely according to his memory. An intrusion meant somebody entered his memory without his permission.

Roland unfolded the ladder behind the door and put it next to the bed. "Perhaps we can do a small test to find out why you came here."

"What's this?" Phyllis asked in surprise.

Roland explained to her, "When I fall off the top of the ladder, the dream will come to an end. You can try it first to see if you can return to the real world. I'll terminate the dream later. If both of us can successfully get out of here, you then wait for me in the hall. I'll be right back."

"Hang on... Your Majesty." Phyllis reached out her hand in an attempt to grasp him.

Roland was astounded at her behavior. It was definitely an act of extreme insolence in Neverwinter. Could she have completely abandoned all her manners and customs learned over the past hundreds of years after coming to a totally foreign environment? Roland thought that was very unlikely.

Phyllis asked in a low voice, "Could you... pinch me?"

"What?" Roland was stunned.

"With the greatest strength that you have, please." Phyllis rolled

up her sleeve and presented her pale arm to Roland.

"I've confirmed that pain won't end the dream."

"I just want to experience some pains... Please."

"Experience?" Roland soon thought of Agatha's description of God's Punishment Witches and immediately understood what Phyllis meant. After a moment of silence, he pinched the witch's wrist with his right hand.

Phyllis clenched her teeth, yielding to an articulate moan of satisfaction. She trembled in such excitement as a thirsty traveler who had a delicious drink once tasted and long since forgotten.

It was after a long time that Phyllis finally opened her eyes and exhaled a long breath.

"God almighty, I can feel pains again!" Phyllis looked like a completely different person, her radiant eyes fixed on Roland, glistening with exhilaration.

Roland spread out his hands. "You can do it yourself too."

Phyllis shook her head and suddenly went to her knees. "That's different, Your Majesty. Perchance, this world is only a dream for you, but I would like to do anything just to stay in here. I'm afraid I would never be able to come back after I leave. Could you allow me to dream just a little longer, at least for now?"

Chapter 787: Go! To the New World!

Roland fell silent.

Phyllis was right. To Roland, sensations were something so natural that he almost regarded them as inherent elements of the world. As to his dream, due to its bizarreness and incompleteness, he viewed it as a fictional world created by his imagination. To Phyllis, however, this world was her dreamland. It was the light at the end of the tunnel. No matter what snares and toils awaited for her, Phyllis would try her best to reach for it.

If her intrusion was indeed an accident that would not recur and if she just left like this, she would probably lose something beyond Roland's imagination. If pains were the only thing that Phyllis would experience in this long-lost dream world, that would be too cruel for her.

Roland breathed out a sigh. At length, he held Phyllis' hand and said, "I see. Let's do the test in the evening."

Two days in the dream world roughly had the same timespan as a full night in the real world. He would just wake up a few hours later if he stayed in the dream until evening. So, that should not cause a problem. These few extra hours, however, would allow Phyllis to have a thorough exploration of this brand new world.

"Thank you, Your Majesty..." Phyllis rose and once again placed her hand over her heart, a particular salute normally conducted by senior members of the Union. "I now come to understand why the

Witch Union fully supports you."

Roland was about to make a response when suddenly, somebody pounded the bedroom door. He heard Zero's voice outside the room. "I made some tea. Do you guys want some?"

"What the hell... is she doing?" thought Roland. Usually, Zero would disappear for quite a while when she was inflamed. She definitely would not boil water or make tea. "What trick is she playing now?"

Roland opened the door, brows remaining clouded, only to find there was nothing in Zero's hands. The little girl cast Roland a stare and then poked her head into the room. She studied Phyllis critically, eyes full of alert.

"Hey, where's the tea?"

"In the living room. Go fetch yourself." Zero grudged him a grunt. "By the way, don't you guys produce weird noises. You distract me from doing my homework!" At these words, she stormed away.

"Um... so that's the reason." Roland shook her head, speechless. Children these days seemed to be more sophisticated than he expected them to be. If it were him, he would just have inquired about their health with some concerns and asked if they would like to go to hospital rather than forming those crazy, inappropriate ideas in his head.

Roland shrugged after closing the door. "Pay no mind to her. A child born in the 2000s is supposed to be like that. It's a different age after all."

Phyllis looked quite confused. "The 2000s? A different age? What's your relationship with her..."

"Just a roommate," Roland explained to Phyllis without giving her the details. He simply waved away her questions. Although Roland had once told her that his battle with the pope was a Battle of Souls, he had not told her that this little girl was actually the former pope the pure witch. Zero had started a new life in the dream world. Her past was now a history. Roland did not feel it necessary to connect her with the other world again.

Phyllis bit her lip. "I see. Well... please continue. You can use other methods. I'll try to keep silent this time."

Roland put his hand on the forehead, feeling a little amused and frustrated.

"Is she addicted to pains now? There is so much fun in this world. She absolutely doesn't have to stick to this one sensation solely."

"Ahem." Roland cleared his throat. "Since you've come to the dream world, let me show you around."

"Can I go out... like this?" Phyllis asked in surprise. "It's apparently very different from Neverwinter here. Won't I cause

you trouble if somebody notices my presence?"

Phyllis had clearly observed the dramatic change in the surroundings, but evidently, she thought people in this world still acted the same way as those in the four kingdoms where witches were repudiated by the mass. She believed people who looked different would always be subject to discrimination or persecution.

Roland smiled at her. "If you were a witch, you would be nothing but a celebrity here. I've told you that this is a brand new world. Being different brings you no harm. Instead, you'll have a lot of fans who admire you. Of course, all of these is on the premise that you don't break the laws."

"Is, is that so?" Phyllis instantly cheered up. "There're taverns and inns here as well, aren't there?"

Roland curled up his lips. "Do you want to try some wines and food here? There're more food and drink than you can ever imagine."

"So her original plan was to stay in and feel pains over and over again?" Although the idea of torturing such a pretty, kind-hearted lady sounded quite thrilling, Roland thought this would lead him to do something irrevocably wrong.

That was such a narrow escape! He almost made a huge mistake.

"By the way, since you're now in your own body, are you still able

to use your magic power?"

"Ah... I almost forgot about that," Phyllis exclaimed in a low voice. "Let me try."

She shut her eyes and held her breath. Nothing, however, happened in a while.

"It doesn't work?"

"Yes... I can feel the magic cyclone. It's just a bit rusty since I haven't used it for a while," Phyllis answered, a little embarrassed. "Just a moment... It's coming out."

At these words, two black, scrawny claws suddenly grew out of her back and spread out on her shoulders. At the first glance, they looked like a pair of devil's hands or wing skeletons.

Roland stroked his chin. "This is..."

Phyllis breathed out a long sigh. "I call it Blade Claws. The claws are retractable and can stretch as far as my ability allows. They're much sharper than ordinary ironware. When I fought with Army of Demons, those claws protected me from the attacks from behind and also helped me defy strong Senior Demons."

"So you were a combat witch."

"That's right. In the Taquila age, I was the guard of the Three Chiefs." Phyllis took a pause. "But there's one thing that I don't really understand. Based on the research conducted by the Quest Society, magic power comes from the Bloody Moon. Why does magic power also exist in your dream world?"

Roland spread out his hands. "Although this world is created by my imagination, it probably also has something to do with the Bloody Moon. I'm still trying to figure it out. I'll fill you in when we're outside. Since we've decided to do the test in the evening, we'd better get started rather than wasting time here."

"Yes, Your Majesty!" Phyllis replied with excitement.

As it was Saturday, Roland decided to take Zero with them. Otherwise, this little girl might hold a grudge against him for quite a long time.

"Also, you don't need to call me 'Your Majesty' in the dream, just Roland. There's no king in this era."

"Well... in that case, please excuse my impudence."

Roland was not quite sure if it was an illusion, for Phyllis paid more respect to him than before, and her respect seemed not to be feigned. Roland felt this accidental intrusion would not appear to be that bad if he could win the support of a witch from Taquila in this way.

Chapter 788: Gourmet Journey

"You're not coming? Hey, what do you mean by that? Not only are you late, but you just told me that you decide to bail out at the last minute?"

The yelling from the other side of the line got Roland to move his head away from the speaker. Even though he could not see Garcia, he could clearly sense her anger.

"I have an unexpected visitor whom I have to receive." While Garcia was panting, Roland explained quickly, "I have no other choice. You know that besides me, there's only a 14-year-old girl in my apartment. How can I rely on her to receive a guest?"

"Your room number is 0825, right? I'll come over and talk to you."

"Um... I'm not in the apartment right now..." After uttering those words, Roland squinted and prepared for the next round of vocal attack.

As expected, Garcia raised her volume again. "Don't you know that I've made an appointment with the seniors of the association? I thought you were finally able to take some responsibility. How can you just bail on me? Do you think I don't know what you're up to? Come back now!"

"Taking responsibility... what the hell is that supposed to mean? It's such a misleading phrase," Roland said to himself.

When he saw the taxi driver with an expression of "Man, well done, I totally understand you", Roland knew that further explanation would not work.

"What did you say? The reception isn't too good. I've just entered Oriental Road. Hello, are you still there? Hello... hello?" After putting on this self-directed show, Roland hung up the phone. He also turned the phone off, just in case she called back.

He had probably completely offended this Martial Arts star.

He had not expected that Garcia would care so much about whether he was going to join in Martialist Association. Her reaction once again confirmed Roland's speculation that she only appeared distant to strangers. As soon as he was recognized as the Awakened of the Force of Nature, she revealed her real personality.

"That was so cliché," Zero at the back seat said coldly, "do you think we're living an exclusive life in a deep forest? How can we encounter a reception problem when we're still in the city?"

"Aren't you smart." Roland took a glance at the back seat. Phyllis was still sitting close to the window, stupefied by everything outside. She had been sitting there, motionless ever since she had crept into the car. It was no surprise to see her react like this as high rise buildings, busy traffic, huge advertising bulletins, and wall hanging screens could bring a certain shock to an ancient person. As a matter of fact, the increase in productivity resulted in

drastic changes in the era. The radicality of those changes, which might even shock the locals, could make a city look completely different within merely two decades and would certainly overwhelm a Taquila witch.

Before this trip, Roland helped her change from her raggy robe, allegedly the Taquila uniform, into his own clothes. A T-shirt and shorts were unisex and so there was no problem for Phyllis to wear them. Oddly enough, those cheap clothes looked rather casual and fashionable on her. It seemed a person's appearance could make the ugly become beautiful. The only problem was the bra. In the end, Roland had to request Zero to wrap a cloth around her chest to solve the issue.

The purposes of this trip were specific. They were taking the God's Punishment Witch to eat and buy her a new set of clothes. What if she could enter his dream again? She could not always wear his clothes and be wrapped in cloth.

"Here we are, Green Valley Park," the driver pushed down the taximeter and said, "25 bucks."

This park was not far from Roland's apartment. It was also a piece of fine green land that Roland discovered during his city exploration. There were not many people here and a business street was just nearby. Most importantly, there were KFC and McDonald's chain stores nearby.

Right, these two were Roland's first choices as roadside food stands offered too poor dining environments and there was no guarantee that they tasted good. After all, this trip was meant to let

the guest from the other world have a good time. So naturally, flavors and the dining environment were the two basic criteria. There should also be enough food to feed the witch and make her feel full. Starred restaurants obviously had a better environment, but if the witch indulged herself... Roland was afraid he did not have that kind of financial capacity.

Therefore, fast food restaurants were obviously the best choice.

Besides, Zero had been talking about eating fast food for a long time though this was probably due to the doll toys coming with the kid's meals as it greatly appealed to kids like her.

He brought the two to a KFC restaurant and picked a window seat. Roland went to the counter and directly ordered two family buckets and one kid's meal.

"Why did you buy so much?" Zero asked in surprise upon seeing Roland put so much food on the table. "Uncle, although you have a job now, you shouldn't squander your money."

"I am rarely generous. Why don't you just enjoy it?"

"Ok!" She finally stopped pouting upon seeing the toy in the kid's meal.

"Eat with us. If you want more, just tell me." Roland handed a piece of fried chicken to Phyllis. After being fried in a high-temperature, high-pressure environment, the chicken skin

appeared a tempting golden color. One would get a good appetite by purely smelling at it. The chicken cooked with the modern method not only had its tender and smooth flavor, but the meat also had the fresh tastes of spices like black pepper, thyme, garlic, and salt. The flavor was entirely different and the plain boiled chicken in old times couldn't compare to it.

Although modern men always complain about the high calories and the universal taste of fast food, it was absolutely a delicacy in an area where food and seasonings were always in deficiency. It would definitely blow Phyllis away, who had not tasted food for the last few hundred years.

On the way there, she perfectly followed Roland's instruction and regardless what strange things she saw, she would not ask. She would try her best to imitate how others behaved, but the moment she bit into the fried chicken, she could not control herself any longer. Hot tears filled her eyes and trickled down uncontrollably.

"What's wrong, sister..." Zero was stunned.

"Um, nothing. It's just she's been starving for too long. Phyllis' families didn't treat her well... They've always wanted a boy, yet weren't able to get one... Anyway, you're too young to understand that. You only need to know that she didn't live a happy life there."

"I see..." The little girl's expression softened, probably out of sympathy.

Roland did not intend to make a fuss about why Zero called

Phyllis sister, yet himself uncle. Watching the ancient witch gulp food down while weeping touched him.

For the witches, the mundane pleasure of enjoying food was a dream that they were willing to pay anything for. He felt sad for the unfairness of it all. Fortunately, the experience today gave Phyllis a little solace although it was hard to say whether there would be another chance next time.

What he could do for them was to try his best to fulfill her wish during this one-day adventure.

Chapter 789: A Guess on the Soul Transfer

"This is... awfully delicious!" Phillips finally slowed down after gobbling the food for quite a long time.

People who passed by were all shocked at the boxes of hamburgers and egg tarts piling up on their table. These food was apparently enough for five or six people. However, they only saw three people sitting here and two of them were slender, attractive girls who did not seem that they could eat a lot. Given this, most people passing by thought it must have been the man who had devoured so much food and despised him for being such a greedy glutton.

Seeing those disdainful looks on their faces, Roland felt helpless but at the same time rejoiced over his wise choice of picking a cheap fast food chain store instead of an expensive restaurant. Otherwise, this meal with Phyllis would definitely bankrupt him. He said to Zero, "Wipe her mouth."

The little girl took out a wet wipe to remove the tear and oil stains on Phyllis' face. Thanks to the natural beauty of a witch, she did not need any make-up. Otherwise, she would look terrible after eating this brunch in a flood of tears. This was probably the first time for the little girl to meet so miserable a person that even a KFC meal would bring her to tears. Her attitude toward her totally changed because of a sudden flush of compassion.

Seeing her finish the brunch, Roland took a sip of his coke and said to Phyllis, "Here're some ice cream cones, but let's talk about the Dreamland first. Before you entered it, did you find anything

unusual?"

"But..." She glanced at the little girl sitting beside her and hesitated.

He blinked at the ancient witch and said, "That's alright. It's just a dream you had in your childhood."

She immediately got what he meant and said, "Oh, well. It happened long before. Let me think... No, nothing special. I just leaned on the wall and disconnected myself. In this way, I can quickly refresh myself without being totally off guard."

"Can you sense the changes in the surroundings even after disconnecting yourself?"

She nodded. "Yes. By doing so, I just stop my control over the body and send my consciousness into the darkness. In the dark, I can still sense the dangers nearby, but I don't see or hear them. This feeling is hard to describe. It's like someone else reminding me of the dangers in the dark. Celine calls this phenomenon a subconscious connection. Only when we're kept in soul containers will we truly become unconscious."

Zero twitched her mouth. "What're you talking about? Who's this Celine?"

"A shrink. Don't interrupt when adults are talking." Roland gave her a glance and continued. "If you get bored by this, go to the park

to watch people fishing or flying kites, but don't walk too far away from us."

She snorted and left unhappily with an ice cream cone in her hand.

Looking at the little girl through the French window, Phyllis asked, "Is it safe to let her go out alone."

Roland shrugged and said, "It's fine. It's pretty safe in this era, and she's not easy to deceive. Let's go on."

"Yes, once I'm in a deep sleep, I won't be able to do anything except drifting about in the endless darkness where there's no light, no sound, nothing at all." The ancient Witch paused. "However, this time, in my deep sleep, I saw your residence in this Dream World. My astonishment was beyond description at that moment. Fortunately, I saw you soon."

After a little thought, Roland said, "Well... The only special thing about your deep sleep this time was that you slept in my castle."

"Yes, just that." Phyllis swallowed her last ice cream cone and heaved a long sigh of satisfaction.

Seeing the cone disappear into the ancient witch's mouth, Roland suddenly thought of an idea. "Beams of the light!"

"What?"

"You told me that when I fell asleep, there would be a beam of yellow-orange light as huge as the city wall, didn't you?"

Phyllis was startled and then seemed to realized something, too. "Yes, I did."

"And you also have a beam of the light, don't you?"

"You mean... our beams of the light overlapped?"

"Yes. The lord castle of Border Town is just an ordinary stone building. It doesn't have the power to bring you into this Dreamland. I've thought this thing over and over. Only our beams of the light can do that." Roland suddenly clapped his hands. "But I guess the overlapping is just one reason for this. Meanwhile, you've also got to cut off your consciousness to get here. Otherwise, Anna, Nightingale and some other witches would have come to this Dream World long before you."

At the same time, Roland thought of something else. He had been baffled about the word "soul" in Taquila witches' stories.

They had transferred their souls into different shells, such as God's Punishment Warriors and those strange carriers left by the underground civilization. In this way, they had successfully controlled these shells, but they had never explained to him what souls were.

Based on his understanding, a person's soul was his or her thoughts and memories, which were generated by the communication between neurons through electric currents. He had believed that a soul was not something real or something which could continue to exist when it left a human body. However, the Taquila witches had told him that the underground civilization's soul core could not only extract one's soul but also transplant on something else.

He had attributed this to the wonders created by magic power, but now he thought it differently.

What if memories and minds could be analyzed? Supposing beams of the light and magic power all come from the Bloody Moon, these so-called souls may also come from it. Once the soul core is activated to extract someone's soul, his or her memories and minds will be somehow copied and stored in the Bloody Moon. The beams of the light just serve as the transmission passages in this process. That's how the Soul Transfer works.

Pasha used to say that as the process of transforming magic power into something real was extremely complicated, the deities took over this job and gave different witches beams of the light in different sizes. No matter she was right or wrong, her theory, to some extent, can explain why the beams on the heads of the God's Punishment Witches became much thinner after the Soul Transfer. Transmitting someone's mind and memories is much easier than transforming magic power into some effects or some objects in the real world. Given that, this Soul Transfer process won't need a wide transmission passage.

My Dream World is far more complicated than most of the witches' abilities. That's why my transmission passage, namely, my beam of the light is as wide as the city wall. When Phyllis cut off her consciousness within my beam of the light, her thoughts and memories stored in the Bloody Moon overlapped with my Dream World. That's how she got into this world.

Roland was thrilled at this discovery, since this theory seemed to be able to explain all the things that had puzzled him for a very long time. If overlapped beams of the light did bring Phyllis into the Dream World, that meant this world was also a part of the Bloody Moon. Through Zero's Soul Battlefield, he somehow created this world in the "Divine Domain" of magic power.

When he was about to tell this discovery to Phyllis, a loud bang broke out in a restaurant next door, coupled with lots of glass window fragments flying out. People fled the place in panic, crying and screaming, making the diners in the KFC restaurant nervous and confused.

Chapter 790: A New Fallen Evil

"Run! It's a Fallen Evil!"

"He changed just a moment ago. Call the police, hurry, hurry!"

"He-Help, I, I sprained my ankle."

"He's coming, watch out!"

"Ah—"

Roland followed the crowd out of the KFC store and found the restaurant next door was in a chaos. The diners all scrambled to the door, crowding together in the hallway leading to the only exit. Most people nearby turned around and fled the moment they heard a Fallen Evil appear, and some of them turned on their cellphone cameras to record what was happening while retreating from the scene. Only a few voluntarily stayed behind to help, carrying the people who got hurt or frozen in horror out of the dangerous place.

Phyllis burped and asked, "Didn't you say that this age is very safe?" She touched her full stomach, happiness lingering in her eyes, completely undisturbed by what was happening nearby.

"Ahem, this is just an accident. Don't worry," Roland said, feeling a little embarrassed. He just wanted to have a meal outside, but this cruel Dream World chose to let its creator run into another

attack instead of taking care of his emotions.

He also noticed the name "Fallen Evil". He had come across it repeatedly in news reports in recent days. He was not sure whether it was an illusion. It seemed that recently a growing number of people had awakened with the Force of Nature, but most of them had turned out to become monsters that were unable to control themselves.

He knitted his eyebrows, thinking of "the Erosion from an alien world" mentioned by Garcia two months ago.

Phyllis asked, "Who's our enemy? Do you need me to take care of it now? Or go to find Zero first?"

Roland turned to look at the park behind them and shook his head. "She'll be safe staying there. Let's kill this monster first." He still remembered the first attack he had encountered in this Dream World. The moment he had met the burnt-face man, the strange man had made it clear that he had been trying to lure and kill martialists. Given this, Roland thought it was not a good choice to leave this enemy here.

More importantly, he really liked the queer sense of replenishment he had got when the Magic Cyclone of the Fallen Evil had disappeared in his hand, as though a gust of warmth had filled his body and made him feel more energetic and powerful.

"The enemy is probably a new Fallen Evil. You can consider it as a hybrid demonic beast. The Force of Nature protects it from all

ordinary weapons. Given that, you've got to use the same force to defeat it."

"The Force of Nature?"

"Yes, it's the magic power in this world except that it has no gender restriction here. Look at me." Roland bent to pick up a stone. He summoned the flowing energy in his body and then pulverised the stone.

Phyllis was startled. "You've... become an awakened."

Roland nodded with a completely straight face, but meanwhile secretly took pride in the extraordinary power he had obtained in this world. He explained to her, "But, unfortunately, my power is only effective in this Dream World."

The ancient witch was so impressed that she exclaimed, "You're not common in either of the two worlds."

"We must hide and attract the monster to a secluded place to kill it. These two chain stores must have hallways connected to the indoor shopping mall behind them. Let's go."

Roland and Phyllis went back to the KFC store and found a door leading to the shopping mall in its staff area. As he had expected, the loud bang had scared most shoppers away. They only saw a mess behind the door.

Instead of getting into the McDonald's where the Fallen Evil had awakened, he asked Phyllis to summon her Blade Claws and release her magic power in the mall. Based on what he knew, a Fallen Evil would sense the power and eagerly run after it. The burnt-face man had been attracted by him in this way and had even mistaken him as a martialist.

Soon, with a loud explosion, the back door of the McDonald's was torn apart. A roaring man rushed out of its staff area in the smoke and darted at Phyllis without a word.

As the miraculous power had drastically improved Roland's dynamic vision and reaction speed, he clearly captured the appearance of the enemy. Different from the burnt-face man, this Fallen Evil's red cyclone in his left hand was much smaller and dimmer. That meant he had just awakened. This time, Roland did not feel a strong thirst for this newly awakened Fallen Evil' cyclone, since the circulating speed of the warm current in his body did not significantly accelerate.

According to their plan, Roland and Phyllis were going to drag this man into the KFC first. However, he suddenly stretched his left arm toward Phyllis and opened his left palm.

In an instant, the air in front of the Taquila witch expanded rapidly, creating surging waves visible to naked eyes. Roland had a chance to escape from the coming explosion, but he still decided to stay behind Phyllis to protect her, since the latter did not have a strong God's Punishment Warrior body in this world. The explosion sent them flying toward the KFC's kitchen. He caught her from the back, cushioning the blow for her.

The blast sent them through a wall built with soundproof panels before they fell heavily to the ground near the KFC counter.

Covered by dust, Roland coughed and then tried to slightly move his lower back. He found that his resilience seemed to increase together with his strength, as he felt alright except for some numbness at this moment.

Meanwhile, he was surprised by this Fallen Evil's ability. No hybrid demonic beast in the real world had any attacking method like this, and even the burnt-face man who seemed to be more powerful had not revealed similar ability in the last attack he had met in this Dream World.

He looked at the witch in his arms. "Are you alright?"

"Sorry... I was too careless, but trust me, the fight will end soon." Phyllis lowered her head while slowly getting on her feet. The cheap short-sleeved shirt she wore had several tears, and one of her claws on the back was broken. Apparently, she had used these claws as a shield to protect herself in the explosion.

Before long, the Fallen Evil walked into the KFC, breathing heavily. As soon as he saw Phyllis, he smiled ferociously and stretched his arm toward her again. "Time to die, martialist!"

At this moment, he did not notice that the broken claw at his feet was not dead yet. Instead, it sprang up from the ground all of a sudden and struck at his neck.

With a flash of a dim light, the ferocious smile of the Fallen Evil froze. His head slowly slid to the side, hitting the ground like a ragged bag, and his blood spurted from his broken neck.

Phyllis immediately controlled the broken claw to cut off the man's left arm and precisely slit the arm to take out his Magic Vortex.

The headless body finally crumpled down to the ground.

"As long as a broken claw is within a distance of 10 steps, I can still control it. For my enemies, it'll be even more dangerous than the intact claws. Since most of them never expect those broken claws to move again, they can seldom escape from this kind of fatal strikes from the back." She smiled and handed the crimson vortex to Roland. "Is this the Force of Nature you said?"

"Yes, it's like a Magic Cyclone, isn't it?" Roland had noticed that the vortex had stopped twirling the moment it had left the Fallen Evil and had become something like a shining gemstone. It remained to be so in Phyllis' hand. However, when he picked it up, it started to twirl rapidly again, its color changing from red to light blue. In the end, it turned into a beam of dazzling light shooting toward the roof and then become a silver thread gradually disappearing into the air.

He felt greatly satisfied again, as the warm current inside his body began to calm down.

Chapter 791: A Coming Crisis in the Dreamland

Phyllis asked in surprise, "What's this light?"

"I don't know. It's probably to send magic power back to this world." Roland shook the dust off his hands. "We have to leave this place as soon as possible. If someone sees us here, we'll have trouble."

"But, isn't this guy our enemy?"

He explained, "Yes, he's our enemy, but in this age, not everyone has the right to kill him or any other nefarious murderer. A special organization and its professional staff are in charge of arresting and punishing these bad guys." As for Fallen Evils, Garcia had told Roland that the martialists with hunting licenses granted by the association also had the right to kill them. In fact, these licenses not only allow the martialists to kill any suspected Fallen Evil but also gave them the right to kill any Awakened who probably harbored evil intentions. Roland believed that if this secret was made public, it would inevitably spark a public outcry.

"What a strange age," Phyllis commented.

They walked out of the KFC and found it was less chaotic. Seeing the Fallen Evil leave in a sudden, all the people still stuck in the McDonald's felt relieved.

Roland soon saw Zero dash toward him while pushing through the crowd.

She looked worried. Her hair band had slipped off, her long white ruffled hair tumbling down to her shoulders. Some people around her tried to make her stop, but this little girl managed to elude them with adroit movements. When she finally reached Roland, her anxious look yielded to a joyful smile.

However, the smile lasted for only a few seconds. She quickly straightened her face and shouted angrily. "Why did you come out so late? Even a tortoise runs faster than you, uncle!"

A flush rose to her cheeks because of the recent exercise and she panted heavily. Looking at her, Roland could not help bending over to touch her head. "Sorry to make you worried."

Zero gritted her teeth and glared at him. "Who was worried about you? This is her first time to visit this city. What if the crowd separated her from us?"

Despite what she said, the little girl still willingly accepted his touch.

After that, Roland spent a lot of efforts explaining to her what had happened to them and why they had come out so late. He made up a story to explain what had been dragging their feet, and Zero finally calmed down after hearing that they had been affected by the Fallen Evil's attack and had nearly lost the chance to escape.

Fortunately, they had a smooth, happy journey after the attack. Roland took the girls to shop clothes and then to have dinner at a hotpot restaurant. As a unique cuisine, hot pot featured a strong flavor and various ingredients. More importantly, it was relatively inexpensive. He ordered a lot of potatoes, starch noodles and lotus root slices, which could easily make them feel full. By doing so, he could still afford this meal even if they overate.

Phyllis' behavior here was no better than her gluttonous actions back in the KFC. With constantly watering eyes, she kept moving her chopsticks to gorge herself with these spicy, tasty food. Roland was not sure whether she was too moved or was simply burnt by the spicy flavor. At the end of their meal, she even picked up the pot to drink some red, oily soup, making all the people around gape at her.

They went back to the tube-shaped apartment building at 9:00 pm. When they walked up to the 8th floor, heading for Roland's apartment, they unexpectedly ran into Garcia.

She stood in their way with a long face, giving them a considerable pressure.

Roland thought, "Has she been here waiting for me since I hung up the phone?"

His lips flinched. In embarrassment, he tried to explain to Garcia, "Look... I did hang out with my relative—"

She interrupted directly, "So, can we talk now?"

Her tone was quite sharp, making Phyllis frown. After a burp, the ancient witch said, "Please mind your attitude. He's this world's lord —"

Roland hurriedly stopped her and said to the girls, "Ahem, it's fine. You go home now. I need to talk with her first and I'll be back soon."

He had been worried a lot that a proud person like Garcia would have flown into a rage and never wanted to meet him again since he had told her such a tenuous excuse and hung up the phone. Anyone being stood up like that would naturally explode with anger. However, beyond all his expectations, Garcia had still waited here for him. Given that, he thought the association might be really short-staffed.

He followed her into Room 0827. Instead of inviting him to take a seat first, she turned around and asked directly, "Have you thought it all over? Or is this... an excuse you made up to reject joining the association?"

She gazed at him, her eyes glaring as if she had wanted to see through his mind.

Roland shrugged and then walked to sit on the sofa. "Do you have any water? Ice water will do."

At this moment, he thought he saw blue veins throbbing at her temples.

Hearing this, Garcia took a deep breath and then said through her teeth, "I'll go to get you some."

"Thank you."

Roland took a sip of ice water and slowly asked, "I've got a question. I've seen a growing number of reports about Fallen Evils recently and even ran into a newly awakened one in the street today... Does the association have trouble?"

Garcia knitted her eyebrows. "Have you been somewhere near the Green Valley Park today?"

"You know it?"

"Yes. Someone called the police, but it's the association's job to take care of these things. All the martialists close by received the news from the association and I was one of them."

"That monster..."

Garcia said in a deep voice, "It was dead when we got there, and its Natural core was gone. Someone acted faster than we did."

Roland pretended to know nothing about the truth and asked, "Who?"

"I'm sorry, I'm not allowed to tell you that." She shook her head. "In fact, I shouldn't tell you anything about this incident. It's the association's secret. As for your first question, yes, we did have trouble. The Erosion of the alien world is accelerating, and our world will soon face a major crisis. "

"The Erosion again..." Roland quickly captured the keyword. "What kind of crisis?"

"No one knows. Maybe our world will be destroyed in this crisis. Or, all of us will lose our minds and become some monsters. That's why the association needs more people to stand out, fighting against the Erosion. It's the whole world's crisis and has nothing to do with gender, races or nationalities. Everyone who has awakened with the Force of Nature has to shoulder this responsibility!" At this moment, Garcia significantly raised her voice. "As martialists, we may get killed in the fight against the alien world's Erosion, but it's our duty to do so! I can understand if you feel afraid and hesitant. But think about it. If we refuse to fight, who else has the power to protect our world?"

Roland fell silent, surprised at her frankness. She had explicitly admitted that they were understaffed and joining them meant great responsibility and even sacrifice. He believed that no one would act like Garcia in a negotiation. In order to attract more people to join the association, she should have tried to conceal the difficulties the association had instead of being so blunt about the risks of joining it.

Having heard what she said, he understood why some awakened people would rather fight on their own than join this association.

Her eloquent rhetoric about heroism could hardly attract people in this age, as normal people usually placed their personal interests above the benefit of all human beings.

In the beginning, he himself had also planned to join the association just to gain rewards and reputation for himself, but now he realized that this thing was not that simple. As one of the creators of this world, he thought now it was the time for him to find out the cause for the mutation of the Force of Nature and the truth about the alien world's Erosion with the help of the Martialist Association.

He somehow felt that these phenomena must have something to do with the Bloody Moon.

Chapter 792: The Reason Behind the Decision

When Roland was lost in thoughts, Garcia could not wait any more and asked, "I've answered your question. Now, I want to hear your answer."

It took him a few seconds before he made a reply, "Ah, yes, I'll join the association."

"What?" She seemed surprised.

He spread out his hands and said, "I'm willing to join you. Isn't that what you're asking for?"

"Yes... I was just thinking that you..."

"You thought I got cold feet?" He chuckled. "I really just went shopping with my relative in the afternoon. Why can't you trust me? But can I apply to join the association now? You said that the senior is the referee."

Garcia stared at Roland for quite a long time with a serious look, as if she was discerning whether or not this application was sincerely meant. After that she shook her head and explained, "No, she's not a referee. She's my master. I invited her to come to show you how to better use the Force of Nature, but she'll never want to meet you again."

Hearing this, Roland thought, "Uhm, is it because that I stood her up today? She must have been very upset and it seemed that she even reproached Garcia."

She pulled out a piece of paper from her tea table and gave it to him. "You just need to fill out this form to apply. Your signature is required."

Roland was startled. "Is it so simple? It's an association secretly protecting the whole world. Don't you need to hold a ceremony or test my ability first?"

Garcia sneered coldly. "Come on. Do you think we are the ancient Priory of Sion or Knights of the Holy Temple? It's modern times now. Your signature just indicates that we protect your right to know. When the association receives your application form, it'll check your identity and file for social security and grants in your name." She paused. "As for the ability test, anyone who has awakened with the Force of Nature is eligible to become a martialist. You can get much stronger if you work hard. Given this, a test for a newly awakened doesn't determine anything."

Roland felt it was really weird to hear a person brought up in an ancient royal family to talk like this.

When he picked up the pen and was about to sign, she stopped him.

She said solemnly, "I have to remind you again. Once you become one of us, you'll no longer be an ordinary person. You'll enjoy the

rights granted by the Martialist Association and meanwhile have to fulfill your obligations. If you betray us or disclose our secret information, you'll immediately become our enemy. When that happens, we won't bring you to a court. We're allowed to punish any betrayer according to our own procedure. I hope you think it over before you sign."

She had fervently hoped that he could join the association, but now she was reminding him of the risks of joining it. This changed his attitude toward her. He found Garcia in this Dream World was totally different. No matter how devious and cruel the Queen of Clearwater had been back in the Kingdom of Graycastle, she handled everything open and aboveboard in this world.

"I know what I'm doing." Roland nodded and signed his name. "Now, can you tell me the truth about the Erosion?"

"No." She folded the application form carefully and put it in a wooden box under the tea table. "It'll take about two days to verify your identity. You just filed an application. You're not an official member of the association, so I can't tell you anything about it."

"Well... then I've another question. You said that a martialist could get a generous reward by killing a Fallen Evil. Is that true?"

"I've clearly explained this to you before," said Garcia, seeming a little disappointed hearing this question about pecuniary returns.

"I'm not asking about how much the reward is. I just want to know how can the association check that I'm the one who killed

the Fallen Evil." Roland shrugged. "During a mission, I guess I won't be able to fight against a Fallen Evil while recording the whole process with a camera by myself. Do I have to invite another martialist to witness the fight? Or, you guys adopt the ancient way, counting the heads I bring back?"

Garcia got grumpy and said, "Is money that important to you? No matter who kills a Fallen Evil, the world will end up being clearer. Why do you square accounts in every detail and are so particular about personal gains?"

Roland argued, "You're a well-known martialist whose reward for winning a match is equivalent to a common person's yearly income, but just two months ago, I was still a jobless guy. I have to take care of myself and the little girl. You're right. Money is very important to me!"

He deliberately made use of her misunderstanding to delude her into believing this lie. After all, he just wanted to find out the cause of the Erosion through the Martialist association rather than devote himself to the association.

Besides, money was indeed very important to him.

Garcia stared at him for a moment, still seeming a little annoyed and then said, "To prove that you've killed a Fallen Evil, you just need to give its mutated Natural Core to the association."

"I can hand this thing over to the association?" Roland was slightly surprised. Now he thought that it might not be an accident

that the core of the Fallen Evil who had awakened in the McDonald's had remained solid in Phyllis' hand.

"Of course. It's the source of the Fallen Evil's power. Once a mutation occurs, it'll never recover. It can prove the Fallen Evil is eroded. If we don't collect these mutated cores and lock them away, they'll infect other people sooner or later. Ordinary people will lose their minds simply by touching it."

"You mean... a mutated core can be used by different people?"

Garcia said with resentment, "Yes, that's why some people are collecting them. We know exactly what they're thinking. Don't they worry that they'll destroy our world by doing so?"

Hearing this, Roland immediately realized that another group of people were organized to collect the mutated cores and act against the Martialist Association. Garcia who had just let this information slip in a fit of anger was reluctant to divulge any more details about those people.

"But the association must have stored a great number of mutated cores. Aren't you afraid that they'll find the location of the cores or some martialist will betray and leak the secret to them—"

"It's impossible!" She interrupted without hesitation. "Although you're not allowed to know these things at this moment, I can assure you that those crazy guys will never break through the defense line guarding the core area of the Martialist Association. Before they get to the place, the four Defenders will tear them into

pieces!"

He really wanted to ask her where this core area was and who the four Defenders were, but he knew for sure that he could not get the answers from her today. Given this, he suppressed his curiosity and thought to himself. What if I get into the place where those mutated cores are stored and release all of their Force of Nature into the air. When that happens, what'll happen to this Dream World and to myself? How strong will my power and the warm flow circulating in my body become?

No matter what'll happen at that time, I really look forward to it.

Chapter 793: The Ancient Witch's Discovery

Roland went back to his apartment after bidding farewell to Garcia.

Phyllis who had been sitting in the living room waiting for him asked, "Your Majesty, who's that person?"

"She's a warrior. You can consider her as an Awakened with magic power in this Dream World." He waved his hand. "You don't have to mind her attitude. No one in this world knows I'm a king."

"But after all, she's also created by you like everything else in this world..." Phyllis still did not want to let it go. She showed him much greater respect after he had granted her request and treated her to tasty food.

He sat opposite to her and explained, "They don't think so. All the people in this world have their own ideas and memories. Their whole lives have nothing to do with me. This world has its own rules which I also need to follow."

When he was talking about this world, Phyllis' eyes shone with excitement. She had been deeply shocked by her experiences here and had been meant to ask something about him. Now, she finally got the chance.

She looked at Zero's bedroom and then whispered, "Your Majesty, is this the real place where you used to live? Please excuse me for being blunt, but I guess you're not Prince Roland of

Graycastle, are you?"

Roland raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Why did you say that?"

Phyllis was excited. "Because your Neverwinter looks just like this world! When I first came to your city, I didn't quite understand why you built so wide, flat roads for carriages even inside the city where space is limited... But now I know you didn't build them for carriages. You did it for those fast four-wheeled vehicles! Your amazing weapons, your ambitious plan to build a 10-floor building, your powerful machine powered by boiling water and many other things in Neverwinter all seem to have something to do with this world."

After a little thought, he said, "I'm indeed Prince Roland, but when I came to Border Town, some different memories just somehow popped into my head in a sudden. They're some abstract, incredible knowledge, and I've only mastered a small part of it by now." He decided not to tell her his time-travel story that he only wanted to share with his closest witch.

Phyllis did not doubt what he said at all. "Then those memories must be something from the deities. Taquila witches often said that the deities didn't love human beings, but now it seems that we were wrong. You've got the deities' smile. As long as you are with us, we'll be able to defeat demons!"

Roland was startled hearing her share this idea with a decisive air. He had been trying hard to convince the Taquila survivors that he was able to defeat demons, but it was the first time a Taquila witch expressed confidence in him. He was a little uncertain since

he had only brought her to a park and some restaurants instead of a scene of the military exercises.

He subtly mentioned his uncertainty, and Phyllis frankly told him what she thought. "Because of those four-wheeled iron vehicles."

"The vehicles?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. Back in Taquila's age, we had to use lots of horses and carriages to send supplies to the front line camps. Some witches did have the ability to move fast but they could hardly complete this kind of tasks. Once the weight they carried exceeded a certain point, the consumption of magic power would increase by many folds. I believe you've know this phenomenon already."

She continued, "We felt great pressure when the Union seized the demons' Siege Beasts. Such a big thing, hundreds of times heavier than a person, could be operated by only one witch. When its iron shield and bolts on the top were removed, its loading capacity was equivalent to that of four to five carriages. Judging from this, we all knew that demons were much better at manipulating magic power than us. At that time, the Quest Society also believed demons' fighting potential was far greater than ours. Given this, Lady Alice started to pin her hope on the God's Punishment Army plan."

"So you guys judge an opponent's potential by their transportation capacity?" Roland asked with interest.

Phyllis nodded. "Yes. The method to transport goods, manually carried or horse-drawn, determines how far we can go. The species who're able to travel farthest are the strongest." She paused here and could not help smiling. "In this Dream World, I saw a four-wheeled iron vehicle several times farther than a carriage could travel. They're as fast as the wind while carrying over 100 people. That shows this world's strength. If your weapons are also created based on something from this world, I believe they'll easily crush demons."

Having heard her explanation, Roland was touched and lost in thought. Limited by their knowledge and era, the Taquila witches failed to defend the Fertile Plains, but that doesn't mean they're stupid. Phyllis is quite smart to infer this world's strength from some crowded bus. Such an insightful observation is really impressive even for people in modern times.

He suddenly thought of a topic frequently discussed by netizens in forums, "How can we defeat aliens who come to invade the Earth?"

In fact, this discussion was meaningless. Human beings worked hard only to send several astronauts to the moon, the closest celestial body to the Earth. This achievement was nothing when the alien invaders were able to travel hundreds of light years or even across the galaxies to the Earth. The energy they had consumed in their travel was enough to burn the Earth to ashes. How could human beings defeat such strong enemies?

He believed that if a civilization was able to travel in space and expand its power to another solar system, it would be strong

enough to destroy human beings on the Earth. The moment we saw these alien invaders would be our time of death.

To his surprise, he found Phyllis or the dominators of Taquila also knew this truth about war very well.

In the end, the ancient witch stood up and bowed to him with hand on her chest once again. "Though you aren't a witch and unable to activate the Instrument of Divine Retribution, I still believe you're the Chosen One the deities sent to us."

Hearing this tenuous conclusion, Roland did not know whether to laugh or cry, but he did not point out her mistake. He knew that with Taquila witches' support, his Neverwinter would have a brighter future.

He took a deep breath and rose. "We don't have much time. Let's start testing."

They had to move fast and carefully in case that they would wake up Zero at night.

After setting up a ladder, Phyllis climbed to the top and turned her back to the bed. She fell down from the ladder, but nothing changed after her fall.

That meant she could not leave the Dream World by falling.

Now, there were only two possibilities.

She would leave here when Roland left this Dream World. Or, she would be trapped in this world forever.

When he climbed up the ladder and sat on it, ready to fall, Phyllis walked up to him.

"If I can't leave this Dreamland, don't worry. It's a nice place for me. If I can never come back after I leave here, I'll never forget all the things I went through today and will be always missing this world."

Roland nodded and then fell backward.

In an instant, the world was dark again.

Chapter 794: A Sweet Dream

When he opened his eyes, Roland sensed the weight on his arm.

Gently tilting his head, he saw Anna's serenely sleeping face. She lay on her side, pillowing her head on his arm and slightly curling her lips. She seemed to be having a sweet dream.

Fortunately... he could still get out of the Dream World in this way.

He carefully pulled his arm out and sat up. After covering the quilt for Anna, he quietly left the room.

When he walked downstairs, the soldiers guarding at the corridor hurriedly stood up and saluted him one after another.

He waved his hand to indicate that they could do away with formalities and went to the hall on the first floor.

Then he saw Phyllis.

She was standing in the center of the hall with a look of loss on her face. She bent her head and looked repeatedly at her clenched hands as if she was still amazed at the moment when her body regained its senses.

It seemed the answer was the former one.

The Dream World was still under the control of his consciousness.

When he woke up, the world would come to a standstill, while the outsiders would be expelled from it.

"Your Majesty, I..." When she saw Roland, she pursed her lips to force a smile and said, "I woke up from the dream."

Apparently, the God's Punishment Witch had thought of staying in the Dreamland for a split second. She originally had no other choice but to transform into an immortal soul so as to keep fighting with the demons. But the price she paid became increasingly expensive as time went by. It was not surprising that she would change her mind in the face of a new world.

But she eventually suppressed her desire, either due to the Taquila witches, or her hatred of the demons, or both. Whatever the reason was, Roland was full of admiration for her self-discipline.

"We're not certain yet," he smiled and replied, "we've just finished half of the test. We can't know whether it's an occasional or certain result after the integration of light beams until the end of the test. Let's continue here."

Phyllis was a little surprised, asking, "Won't you go back to your bedroom?"

"That may wake Anna up," Roland shook his head and replied. "Anyway, there's heating in the castle and sleeping in the living room is the same." He said a few words to a guard, who widened his eyes in surprise but still faithfully executed Roland's order.

Half a quarter later, the long table in the living room was spread with a layer of soft cushion and quilt.

In this way, the living room was tightly guarded by a group of completely confused soldiers while Roland was sleeping in it alone. Phyllis, as well as the others, stayed in the hall, waiting for the emergence of the light beam.

He had to admit that it was really difficult to fall asleep after he woke up, especially when it was time to reveal the answer to the puzzle.

Roland tossed and turned for several hours until he finally fell asleep at dawn.

The new world instantly recovered operation.

To his surprise, in the Dreamland it was not the early morning of the next day. Outside the window, the neon lights were still flashing. The ladder was still at the bedside. Phyllis's eyes became clear little by little. She suddenly awoke from her dreamy state, bent her head and looked at Roland in disbelief.

"Your Majesty, is... is this true? Am I dreaming?"

He could not help smiling.

The answer was self-evident.

Whether it was a dream or a real world, it might not matter for this God's Punishment Witch.

What was important was that she finally got her compensation after assuming the pain and responsibility for hundreds of years.

...

This time, they only stayed in the Dream World for a short period of time.

Roland had thought that she would eagerly go out and hang around. He did not expect that she would get down on one knee and plead with him to allow her to share the news with her other companions. She promised that the Taquila survivors would remember his kindness forever and would make every effort to serve him.

In the face of this plea, Roland did not respond immediately as usual.

He was not reluctant to welcome the Taquila witches, but he did

not know how to feed so many people. More importantly, Zero had already been suspicious of Phyllis, and he could not claim that these additional 100 witches were all his distant relatives.

Roland would never want to get the little girl, the second creator of the Dream World, involved in these things. If she sensed any problem of this world, he could not predict what would happen. Just to be on the safe side, the Taquila witches could not stay at his home.

Then he would need a place for the witches to live, for example, an entire apartment building. And the daily expenses such as food and drinks would also be a heavy burden for him.

After thinking about it for a while, Roland finally decided to let the witches solve this problem by themselves.

His temporary silence probably made Phyllis misunderstand him. She bit her lip and bent the other leg, kneeled down and begged again. This gesture, which was only employed when ordinary people met the dominator of the Union, had gone beyond the ordinary salute of Taquila witches. Roland tried to pull her up, but she insisted. She begged him not to refuse her companions' entry into the new world.

At this time he finally realized what she was thinking, and explained his plan to her, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. After hearing his explanation, Phyllis let out a long breath of relief.

In fact, for Roland, accepting Taquila survivors was not a

difficult choice as she had thought.

In the Dream World, they would no longer be a group of God's Punishment warriors who had brutal force, but they would be witches of various types of magic power that were not limited by the God's Stone of Retaliation.

With the help of such a group of people, the means and efficiency of exploring the Dream World could be greatly improved. And they could also help him to memorize and copy the knowledge. In the long run, they might also learn various kinds of knowledge and use modern equipment to study the essence of magic power. Of course, the most important point was that even after the Battle of Divine Will ended, the Taquila witches could still find a place to live in the new world.

After leaving the Dreamland, Phyllis could not wait until dawn before she bade farewell to Roland and rushed to the Third Border City in exhilaration.

Roland yawned and went back to his bedroom.

He climbed into the warm quilt and hugged Anna in his arms again. She also opened her bleary eyes and vaguely murmured, "Why did you wake up so early?"

"Well, I hung around in the Dream World," he said as he kissed her on her forehead. "I ran into something unexpected, and then I couldn't fall asleep again."

"Oh?" The girl's breath was like a soft feather gently sliding along his neck. "Was it a sweet dream?"

"Of course." Roland changed into a more comfortable posture and let her pillow on his arm again, "It's a sweet dream for everyone."

Chapter 795: A Kind Heart

Anna leaned on him while listening to how the God's Punishment Witch accidentally entered the Dream World.

"So they can all recover the feelings they lost, and return to the normal life?" She took a deep breath and answered delightfully, but with a bit of melancholy and regret. "That's so good... If only I could also see the world that you had lived in."

"That means that you have to transform your soul into a light beam. It would be too high a price to pay for you," said Roland, stroking her hair and earlobe. "And we can build Neverwinter into an ideal place which can be comparable to the Dreamland, can't we?"

"That's all right," Anna chuckled. "But are you feeling a little guilty now?"

"Er?" Roland was a little stunned, "No, I just..."

"No need to answer. Just let me listen to it." Anna put her head on his chest and whispered after a while. "Uh-huh. You're a little guilty and worried. You're guilty because Phyllis is a woman and also very pretty. And you're also worried that I'll be suspicious. Am I right?"

"Well..." Roland did not know how to respond to her answer which could not be more correct.

Anna tittered and said, "But you're honest, so don't be worried. I trust you." She paused and said with a more serious tone, "Roland, you've made this decision to help them, just like what you did to help the Witch Cooperation Association and me. How could I be suspicious of your kind action? It's your duty as a king, isn't it?"

Roland felt slightly relieved.

If it were Nightingale, he could not be certain that she would not be suspicious. But Anna was different. If she said she believed it, then she really did. And from her expression, Roland knew that she really supported his decision to find a home for the Taquila witches and help them to regain their lost consciousness.

Anna had a kind heart, which had never changed since the day he met her.

"But from now on you must tell me what you do in the Dream World. Promise me." She blinked her blue eyes and whispered in his ear.

Roland nodded, "I promise."

Anna contentedly smiled, slowly climbed onto him and held his cheeks with both hands. She murmured, "Now you're mine."

She gently bit his collar all the way down...

Their sweet breathing sounds could be heard coming from the bedroom.

...

When Phyllis brought the amazing news back to the Third Border City, the witches burst into a commotion.

"As long as we cut off the consciousness in the range of the light beam, we can return to our original appearance?"

"It's not important at all. The most important thing is that we can restore the sense of touch and smell!"

"Is KFC really that delicious? More delicious than roast meat with honey sauce?"

"Could... could you take me to the Dream World?"

"Me too!"

"I would also like to..."

They surrounded Phyllis, eagerly asked her all kinds of questions and behaved totally different from their ordinary calm selves. They had never been so excited, not even in the face of a swarm of demonic beasts invading the underground maze.

"Stop! If we go to the castle together, they'll suspect that we want to occupy Neverwinter!" Alethea shouted and put a tentacle on Pasha, "What do you think of it? Is this a trap by the king of the common people?"

"Even if it were a trap, I'm afraid that they would probably willingly walk into it," Pasha replied with a bitter smile. Until now, she had not recovered from the shock after listening to the story told by Phyllis. A highly developed Dream World, a place where all souls could regain their new life, was a temptation which none of Taquila survivors could refuse. From the king of the common people, they also found the answer of how to defeat the demons, which they had sought for a long time. After suffering for hundreds of years, they finally saw a glimpse of hope. This incredible feeling struck her with a rare dizziness.

It had been a long time since she dreamed.

Subconsciously, Pasha hoped that all this was true, but she was not entirely convinced that such a good thing could happen. A common person with any magic power became the savior of Taquila witches? No wonder Alethea would be vigilant and suspicious.

Luckily she was aware that she had to send someone to verify what Phyllis had said.

That did not mean that she did not trust Phyllis. After breaking with the Union and going into exile, the survivors treated each other as sisters.

She was just worried that Phyllis might have been deceived.

After all, this sounded like a fairy tale and a sweet dream. She had to examine it with great caution.

Thinking of this, Pasha transmitted her consciousness to everyone's mind, "Is King Roland really willing to let the others enter the Dream World?"

"He said so, but not now," explained Phyllis. "That world has rules that must be followed just as in the real world. To avoid unnecessary changes caused by any exposure, the first batch of people must fulfill his requirements to enter the world. They'll assume the pioneer mission and prepare for the admission of more people in the future."

Hearing that, Pasha became a little less worried. If it were a trap, then he would try to let more people fall into it instead of giving the Pioneers a chance to warn others when they realized it.

"What kind of requirement?"

"Well..." Phyllis hesitated for a moment. "He needs witches who can move fast, sneak around, control and attack."

"That means he needs combat witches?" Alethea questioned, "But didn't you say that the power of that world is far above the demons? Isn't his requirement too self-contradictory?"

"He doesn't intend to let us fight against the whole world, but..."

"But what?"

"Well... to loot in private," Phyllis answered with embarrassment. "Of course, the targets are evil people who deserve it."

The crowd fell into a brief silence.

"Wait a minute. Did he think that we're gangsters and thugs? We're the respected..." Her voice was overwhelmed by the sound of the crowd before she could finish her words.

"It sounds interesting!"

"Those guys have no God's Stone of Retaliation, right? Is there anyone who can stop my continuous fireballs?"

"You'll make too much of a loud noise. His Majesty obviously needs quiet actions. My Shadow Dagger is perfect for it."

"You can only shoot within ten steps, not to mention your weak attacking strength."

"I can cover for my teammates. Let's go!"

Pasha soothingly patted the back of Alethea and said, "Don't mind them. They have just been bored for too long."

Chapter 796: First Action of Pioneering Team

The worries and doubts of the Senior Witches lasted only a day or so, and were completely dispelled by the subsequent news.

Everything that Phyllis said was real.

The Third Border City began to seethe with excitement.

In this case, no matter how reluctant Alethea was, she could not stop the other witches who were looking forward to entering the Dream World. At this point, the choice of Taquila was obvious.

Through the phantom instrument, Pasha conducted a meeting with Roland about the covenant.

The God's Punishment Witches in the underground city walked passed the light curtain one by one, lifting the elbow and pressing on the chest to greet the lord of Neverwinter, King of Graycastle and acknowledge him as the only leader of the united front. The Senior Witches who were transformed into original carriers also bent down their main tentacles to show their allegiance. This was a type of salute which had only been received by the Three Chiefs of the Union, signifying that Taquila now had a ruler from the common people after more than 400 years.

Alethea was the last one to show up in front of the light curtain.

As a higher ascendant, Alethea joined the Blessed Army when she was 20 years old and had fought with the demons for more than a decade to defend the glory of Taquila. Pasha was worried that she would do something unexpected. But ultimately Alethea had chosen to put the Battle of Divine Will and the expectations of her companions in the first place and bent her main tentacle to Roland. Regardless of how reluctant she was at the moment, her decision still made Pasha feel relieved.

If it were still in the Taquila age, this would definitely be an incredible scene.

However, a long period of more than 400 years could change many things. The ambitions and convictions that "all mankind will surely defeat the devil under the leadership of witches" were gradually diminished. When a common person showed his amazing potential and grace toward the Taquila survivors, their resistance would seem pointless.

Pasha believed the unanimous view of the Three Chiefs of the Union, that the witches would eventually stand out from the human community. Common people like Roland were only a minority, and the witches would one day return to the position of the rulers. But by then, the relationship between the two sides was bound to be much more harmonious than that of the Taquila age. After all, if they could survive the third Battle of Divine Will, the idea of the witches and the common people working together to maximize their strength would undoubtedly gain in popularity.

She did not mind welcoming such a future.

...

It was already three days later when Roland actually implemented his looting plan.

To ensure that Zero would not suspect, he rented a warehouse near the tube-shaped apartment to serve as a temporary "landing point" for the witches to connect to the Dreamland. As long as the witches assembled here before he interrupted the dream, they would still appear in the warehouse when they entered the next time.

Of course, the first connection would inevitably be Room No. 0825 of the tube-shaped apartment. Roland was puzzled about this and found no explanation for it. Probably Zero was the reason why this room became the key point connecting the real world and the Dreamland. Therefore, he had to wait until Zero went to school every time when a new witch came to the Dreamland.

During these three days, Roland selected four God's Punishment Witches, including Phyllis, as the first pioneers. For the first two days, he bought some fast food and drinks to entertain them and satisfy their extremely strong desire for food and drink. On the third day, he could only afford some instant noodles and mineral water. But even then, they still enjoyed every bite and nearly licked the seasoning packets.

Actually, they had tried but were stopped by Roland.

That would be a discredit to the united front.

As his savings started becoming less, he had to carry out the plan now.

When the night fell, Roland told Zero that he had to work overtime and would go home late. Then he went with the four witches to the villa area outside the third ring of the city in two cabs.

The witches did not just stay in the warehouse to enjoy food and drinks these days. As a former member of the Quest Society, Faldi had a strong detective ability. She was able to create a Magic Bug Nest, link her consciousness with bugs such as moths and bees, and release them to spontaneously search for other Sources of Magic Power. This was very effective in preventing the attack of demons and could also be used to search for some areas inaccessible to ordinary people.

Although the bugs could not provide visions for Faldi, they helped her to feel the types and sizes of the magic power, including the Force of Nature.

After three days of searching, she found more than a dozen magic reaction sources, including Garcia living in 0827.

After excluding the same type, there were still six targets.

Among the six targets, the one living in the villa area was most worthwhile to loot.

That was Roland's plan—searching for the Fallen Evils through effective magic inspection and looting their Force of Nature and property. These mutated monsters did not easily leave their habitats, so even if they were destroyed, their neighbors would not notice. Moreover, even if their bodies were found by the police, the case would be transferred to the Martialist Association. By then, the Association would only believe that they were killed by another group of the Awakened. They would not suspect that another group of superpower bandits were in town.

After getting off the cabs, they came to a dark corner and stood around Dawnen. She then summoned the "matte curtains" to wrap everyone together.

This magical ability could make her companions within the reach of the curtain disappear, but it was far beyond being invisible, as the vision, smell, and magic breath would also be blocked. No one could sense the existence of the hidden people without direct touch. Undoubtedly, Dawnen would play a crucial role in a surprise attack.

With Faldi's guidance, the five people passed straight through the main entrance and walked all the way towards the foothill of the villa area.

Here was the residential area of the rich people in the city. Most villas were built by the hillside with wide yards. Hardly anyone walked around in the evening, which made it a perfect place for Roland's plan.

"Here we are. The target is in it." Faldi stopped and pointed to a vast, detached compound on the side of the road. Its parvis was almost as large as the tube-shaped apartment.

"Damn the enviable rich people..." Roland glanced at the flashing surveillance camera, turned around to look at Ling, the last member of the looting team—no, the pioneering team and said, "It's your turn to help us sneak into the house. Just do as you practiced before."

Ling nodded and slowly faded into the shadow as if she was sinking.

None of the Taquila survivors could directly walk through any obstacles like Nightingale or Margie, but Ling's ability was enough for this task. She could melt into any shadow and move freely like water. Especially in the night when the shadows spread around, the entire parvis became her domain, and she could easily walk through the gaps between the doors and windows.

"Crack!" The door of the house was open with a slit.

Chapter 797: Body of Magic

"Not bad at all." Roland waved towards the black shadow which had deftly entered into the drapes.

A smiling face emerged from the darkness as if to acknowledge his encouragement. This would have been a frightening sight if he had not known that it was a witch hiding inside.

"Your Majesty, enemies are within the hall. I can sense that their magic powers are nearly as strong as hybrid demonic beasts." Faldi cautioned.

"Can you handle them?"

"Don't worry. Ling and I won't have any problems as long as they aren't like Senior Demons." Phyllis replied.

"Then let's act according to plan."

As Roland passed through the long porch, he discovered that the villa's windows were all covered up with boards and tape. There were only a few lights within, making the hall seem rather dim. Due to the weak air-conditioning, he felt as though he had just entered from early autumn into winter. Furthermore, the rancid and putrid smell which filled the air caused him to feel nauseous.

A man dressed in a suit stood motionless in the center of the hall - he was clearly this trip's target. The instant Roland stepped into

the hall, he felt a warmth begin to swell inside his body with an intensity several times stronger than when he first saw the fake man.

From the looks of it, Faldi had snagged a big fish.

However, what distressed Roland was a sculpture of a huge monster hung on the two-story mural wall which the man was facing. He could not tell if it was made of wood or seasoned leather. It had a human face and a pair of wings, while its brawny hind legs and slender front paws were curled up in front of its body - a completely mismatching appearance. It was close to four meters in length, while the carvings of feathers and veins on its body were highly lifelike, thus marking out its high value.

"The grotesque taste of rich people," Roland muttered to himself. Judging from the craftsmanship, it was worth at least a million gold royals.

"Time to act." He looked away from it and placed his attention on the target.

"Yes."

Making use of the matte curtains to sneak two meters behind the enemy, Phyllis initiated the first attack.

A claw protruded from her back and lashed with lightning speed toward the suited man. The interference of magic caused the

curtains to ripple. At this time, the target seemed to sense something and turned his head sharply. However, at this distance, even an Extraordinary would have no time to dodge. The claw slit through the man's neck and out from his lower back, thereby cutting him diagonally into two.

The enemy's eyes stared wide in disbelief as he collapsed on to the floor, and dark red blood spattered all over.

From the looks of it, even if the natural core of a Fallen Evil was not stripped away, it would not be able to survive if its body was heavily damaged.

"That's all?" Ling peered out from the shadow beside the sofa.

"The plundering we now have to do is the main point," Roland answered while covering his nose. The putrid smell in the air had intensified once more, though he was not sure if it was his own false perception. "Do you still remember what I taught you?"

"Gold ornaments, red paper, and chests with orbs!" Ling raised her hand. "Coins are worthless, and leave the gemstones!"

"That's right. In particular, the more red paper, the better." From his experience of plundering the Holy City of Hermes, he knew that the price of gemstones fluctuated too greatly, and hence it was difficult to sell them off at a suitable price. Gold was certainly far more stable. Of course, the best of all was cash notes. He mused to himself, "Hope this fella isn't too fond of online shopping."

As Roland bent his body and intended to convert the Force of Nature which was mounted on the belly of the man, Faldi suddenly frowned and remarked, "Hold on, why do I still sense the presence of magic reaction?"

"What?" The other three people startled at once.

"The source of magic power isn't gone. Instead, it's growing bigger!" She lifted her head and looked around the hall in search of something. Her eyes fell on the sculpture. "Damn it, that monster is alive!"

Just as she finished speaking, the sculpture abruptly opened its mouth and revealed a frog-like tongue which thrust directly at Roland.

"Careful, Your Majesty!"

With no hesitation, Phyllis shielded in front of Roland and used her claws to obstruct the path of the incoming tongue.

But Roland was much improved from his former self. He anticipated the monster's attack, before catching hold of Phyllis' waist and rolling toward one side in order to avoid the tongue which was as sharp as an arrow.

The tongue thrust into the half-section of the corpse lying on the floor. It entwined the natural core and jerked away violently. With that, the crimson core flew in the direction of the sculpture's

mouth.

Roland noticed that the Force of Nature, which had entered into a solid state, began to rotate once again upon the monster's touch.

The monster's movements caused a large swarm of insects to fly out from its back and panickedly flee in all directions. They had obviously been attracted by the monster's magic power, but because Roland could not share what he saw with Faldi, she was not able to discern that there were two different sources of magic reaction in the hall!

"Hah... what do I see, a bunch of martialists delivering themselves to me?" The sculpture swallowed the core and began to speak. "Thieves like you have no place in this sacred territory. Go to hell!"

It raised its neck as if to inhale a deep breath, and then blew a gush of bloodred air at the people in the hall.

It was magic power in its purest form!

In a flash, the furniture in the room was ripped into smithereens. As the matte curtains were struck, Duncan and Faldi, who were hiding within, suffered several wounds on their bodies and fell heavily on the floor. Fortunately for them, they got away from the central and most powerful region of the magical attack by a hair's breadth, or they would have suffered the same fate as the furniture.

On the other hand, Roland was in much better shape. As the magical attack came upon him, the warmth inside him spread all over his body and protected his vital organs like a piece of armor.

"What form of attack is this?" Roland was disconcerted that its ability was completely different from that of witches. He had never seen magic power directly turn into a potent energy before. Ever since he acquired the strange force, he was able to better understand how magic power worked. The monster's attack was certainly not something a Fallen Evil was able to perform.

The expressions on the witches' faces were also that of extraordinary surprise. It was clear that the monster's understanding of magic power was a level above theirs.

"Its magic reaction... is close to the Senior Demons'!" Faldi bit her teeth. "How's this possible?"

"Demons? Is that what you call my ancestors?" The monster grinned and laughed wickedly. It easily snapped off the rivets which fixed its wings to the wall, then leapt onto the floor and stooped like a gargoyle in front of the party. "You try to take energy from the Divine Domain without permission, and now call the Chasers 'demons'? Sheer stupidity!"

"Divine Domain? Chasers?" Roland began to frown involuntarily. "What's it referring to?"

Suddenly, a beam of black light sprung from the shadows behind the monster and flew against its cheeks. It was Ling's shadow! A

crisp clicking sound was heard as she stuck a dagger into its eyes and out from the back of its head. Without pausing to contemplate her success, she escaped back into the shadows. The entire surprise attack was as smooth as flowing water.

"Beautiful!" Phyllis clenched her fists and commended.

"Beautiful?" The monster did not collapse like the Fallen Evil did. A crack appeared on its wooden-like face, and it now spoke in a shrivelled voice which sounded cold and indifferent. "You think this piece of common metal and tiny amount of magic power can harm me? You have no idea what the Divine Domain's all about! Now, I shall let you witness the true might of the Lord!"

Before it finished talking, a series of rupturing sounds broke out. The crack on its face extended to its entire body, and subsequently, its pitch-black shell split into fragments and peeled off. The now-revealed interior emitted a dark red glow, as though it was flowing with burning blood.

When all of its true body was revealed, Roland gaped in shock and horror.

Underneath the shell had been a body which was purely formed by magic power. Small clusters of star jades glistened inside its body, and gradually converged into a huge star ring at its chest.

It was what you could call a magical creature.

Chapter 798: The Will of the World

"What's your Lord's name?"

Roland somehow sensed that this creature was much more emotionally rich than the Fallen Evil. He thus hoped to gather more intelligence by asking it more questions. While doing so, he gestured towards behind him for the two wounded persons, Faldi and Duncan, to leave the place at once. If a situation arose where the party had to flee quickly, he would certainly run faster than these witches.

"My lord's a being that's everything and nothing at the same time. A presence that none of you can fathom." The creature spread its phantom wings, which emitted a red glow, and stretched its hands towards the floor. "Your clever tricks are useless here. You want them to escape now? Too late!"

Scarlet blood flowed from its body and rapidly extended across the surfaces of the room. In the blink of an eye, the floors, walls, and ceiling of the hall turned into a bright red.

Ling, whose hiding place was now uncovered, was pushed out of the wall by an unknown force, and she fell by Phyllis' side.

"What... what's this?" Faldi cried out softly from behind. When Roland turned his head, he saw that spiked tentacles had emerged out of the red and black void and ensnared the witches' legs. He recalled that he had seen something similar before.

But he had no time to contemplate further as the situation was fast deteriorating.

With the warm current in his body spinning ferociously, Roland gathered all of his physical strength and charged directly towards the strange enemy.

"Ooh? You aren't affected?" Astonished, the magical creature raised a palm at him. "How about this?"

An extremely powerful force burst forth from its palm towards Roland. It felt like a huge hammer blow upon impact, and sent Roland flying and crashing into the wall. After a heavy thud, he felt like his back was burning, and that all of his organs had displaced.

"Keke..." He coughed involuntarily, and smelled something sweet yet fishy that had expelled from his throat.

"Your Majesty!"

Phyllis let out an urgent cry. She was, at present, the only person who could move other than Roland. The blade claws on her back danced up and down, hurriedly cleaving the tentacles which had protruded from the floor. However, with an endless number of them to deal with, she was not able to draw close to Roland at the moment.

It was now the crunch time.

But Roland's mind remained exceptionally clear.

There was entirely no fear in him, as if he had deleted the feeling of fear from his brain.

The warm current in him surged ever faster, accompanied by the vigorous beating of his heart. He could feel that an extraordinary change was occurring in his body.

All of the world's magical power was gravitating towards him.

Even the red glow that extended across the walls became sluggish. The trails of blood circumvented his body as they passed by, and wherever he touched, a blue mark would appear.

This process was entirely out of his control - he was unclear about what was happening himself. A strange sound reverberated beside his ear, while the tones of the tumultuous cries seemed to harmonize.

"Kill it, kill it!"

The monster had also begun to notice that something was not right. With a slight fluctuation in its dry voice, it asked, "What's happening... what've you done to my magic power?"

Roland did not reply. He could feel that the warm current had

swelled to its limits, and his body subconsciously arched. The next thing he knew, he was charging directly at the enemy like a cannonball!

"Kkkkkiiiiilllllllllll iiiittttt!!!!!"

"Die!" Repeating its old tactic, the monster raised its hand towards him once more.

But this time, Roland was not struck down by the monster's force. For the first time, he saw the warm current rush out of his body to form a pair of blue light curtains in front of him. When the pair collided with each other, a dazzling radiance burst forth and hovered above his head, which then brought him flying directly into the monster's chest.

He swung out a punch.

The impact of his fist on the monster's chest was not as he had expected. It felt as if he had just struck a lump of soft liquid. He saw his arm sink into the monster's body only a fingerbreadth away from the star jades. Gritting his teeth, Roland opened his fist and grabbed hold of the most prominent star ring on its chest.

At once, the monster let out a deafening roar. "No... this is the Lord's strength, how did you... touch it!"

The galaxy-like ring began to quiver, and it gradually changed from its rich red into blue and white. This, however, occurred at

an extremely slow rate, and there were several relapses. At this moment, Roland felt as if he was tussling with a fierce bull. Fortunately for him, more and more magical power flowed towards him, and it felt like the entire world was blending into one with him.

"So that's it... I understand now!" A vortex-like eye on top of the monster's head opened. "You're... the one responsible for creating this world! It was you who defeated my Lord!"

"Didn't you already call him 'everything and nothing'? How could I even touch him?" Roland laughed sardonically.

"You fool! My Lord may be almighty, but he can't stop all of this himself... Go back and never return here, your actions are destroying everything... Hsst... All living things, and not only yourself, will perish because of you!"

Its voice became increasingly unclear, as if it was affected by severe interference.

Roland could feel that the resistance of the star ring was weakening. The color change also became faster.

"All living things?" He turned his head and glimpsed at the witches sitting feebly on the floor, before he continued in a low voice. "No, the only ones who shall perish are your kind... I've no idea where you're from, or what intention you possess, but certainly, this world will be better without you!"

"From... hssst... Bottomless Land... no intention... hssst... this is rule..." The monster was no longer able to spit out a complete sentence. Roland further noticed that it was not as emotionally expressive as it was. Its voice had turned flat and monotonous, as if it was one of those answering machines which provided a fixed response.

When it finished speaking, the resistance in Roland's hand vanished instantly.

The star ring began to spin rapidly, and drew all of the surrounding star jades towards itself to form a dazzling white light. For a moment, Roland seemed to hear the heartbeat of the earth.

This time, the scene of the surging of magic power was even more spectacular than the previous two times. The monster shrunk into a round mass and released a column of silver light that shot straight to the ceiling for an extended period of time. Standing in front of it, Roland felt an indescribable satisfaction and bodily pleasure which exceeded the sum of his previous two encounters. There was nothing which could compare to the sight of this light column.

The witches' conditions were nothing too serious, except that they had expended all of their magic power. They were still able to walk on their own. According to Phyllis, when Roland was in a deadlock with the monster, the magic power of all four witches was taken in by him. This was something which could never have happened in the real world.

However, it was simply one more thing to add to a night when so many unimaginable events had already taken place.

After a quick search, Roland, carrying a heavy safe together with the car key taken from the suited man, led the witches quietly out of the foothill villa.

Chapter 799: Changes

Thankfully, driving lessons were all the rage during his university days, and he, too, had signed up for them together with his friends. But he had never thought that the first time he would touch a steering wheel after receiving his license would be in the realm of dreams.

"Your Majesty, what exactly was that monster?" Faldi asked faintly. "Can a Fallen Evil also possess such strength? It seems theoretically unjustifiable that they can obtain so much magic power in such a short time."

While evading the first round of magical attacks, it was Duncan and her who received the greatest damage. Half of her beautiful violet curls had fallen off as a result. Fortunately, none of her wounds were fatal, and her head (except for her hair) and torso were practically unblemished. In other words, she had chosen the optimal form of evasion against the sharp yet unpredictable attacks. It, therefore, has to be said that all of the Taquila survivors were highly-experienced warriors, as evident by the fact that even a witch who was mainly not combat-type could perform this well.

Because of this, the pioneering operation did not end in failure. Although Roland did not know what would happen if one died in dreamland, he hoped that there would never come a day when this doubt would be addressed.

"Did the Union never have a similar ability?"

"Of course they did... what we call biting, is precisely caused by the damage inflicted by magic power on a body." Faldi gasped as she spoke. "As a witch increases her capacity for magic through continuous practice, her body will become more used to this kind of damage, and her recovery speed will also improve. Whether it be for us, demons, or hybrid demonic beasts, our levels of magic power can only be slowly cultivated."

"I get it now," Roland thought, "this is the first time she has seen a living thing that's purely formed by magic power. In other words, she was only cognizant of life that's formed of flesh and bone. Therefore, it was natural that she couldn't understand an enemy she had never seen before."

He did not have such doubts himself. From the moment the monster revealed its translucent body, he had already regarded it as a spirit or an elemental, and he believed that because it was formed by magic, it was certainly not going to be affected by magic.

However, this was not an easy problem to explain, and his conjecture was not necessarily accurate. He recalled that when the blue light in the monster's body held the upper hand, the monster's visibly declining mood and consciousness could have caused it to revert to a more conventional living form. At last, Roland could only shake his head and reply, "I don't know what it is either. But I can confirm that it's not a Fallen Evil."

"Are there many more monsters like this in the Dream World?" Ling asked, still in a state of shock. "When the shadows in the room were covered by the black and red void, I felt my body freeze,

as if there was something extremely frightening that was observing me all the time. I swear, even facing the Senior Demons wasn't as scary as this."

"I believe there aren't that many, or else the Dream World would have been seized by them long ago," said Roland reassuringly. The Martialist Association could handle the Corruptors, which were not affected by conventional force, but against this type of monster, even 12 martialists might not be sufficient to win. If there were many of them, the Association would probably have been destroyed by now.

In retrospect, he realized that he could finally confirm Garcia's assertion that the corruption of the outside world was inseparably related to the Bloody Moon. The tentacles which protruded from the void was similar to the scene in the Divine Domain.

Yet, why would the Bloody Moon corrupt the dreamland? Isn't this world a part of it? Who's the Lord that the monster spoke about? Is it a real deity or a source of magic power? If it truly detests the Dream World, why did it remain silent when he touched the divine relics?

Roland also took extra note of the "Bottomless Land" which the monster mentioned last. It was perhaps due to linguistic assimilation that the structure of this term was similar to that found in the Land of Dawn. It was only when referring to an entire continent that it would be phrased this way. For example, although the meaning of "Divine Land" was similar, it was expressed in a different way.

Supposing that the Bloody Moon is perpetually observing the real world because of the Battle of Divine Will, does that mean that what it reveals is an actual continent, just as I've understood?

These questions were best left to an explorer to solve.

Of course, not every witch was still contemplating the events of the battle that just happened. Phyllis, who sat in the front passenger seat, had already cast aside the heavy emotions she felt during the battle, and was much more interested in understanding the operation of this limousine. When she was seated in a taxi previously, she was instructed to remain silent due to the presence of an outsider. This time, she could no longer control her wild curiosity, and stared unblinkingly at Roland, as if she was trying to memorize every action that he made.

"You want to learn driving?" Roland asked jokingly, having also relegated his thoughts to the back of his mind.

Phyllis immediately nodded.

"We'll have to perform a few more tasks first." He took the opportunity to entice her. "When the time comes, we'll be able to enjoy different cuisine every day, and having your own room and private car won't be a problem."

"Will the food taste better than KFC and hotpot?" Faldi added.

"Those are entry-level stuff. Once we have money, you'll find out

that even if you ate something different every day, you'll never be able to taste all the different types of cuisine in the world."

Though Roland did not turn his head back, he could sense the glowing gazes from the witches behind him.

"When Duncan's fine, let's move on to the next house. I've already marked its location." Faldi's voice remained soft, but it was not as faint as previously.

"I'm okay. We can set off tomorrow once our magic powers have recovered." The petite Duncan replied in a positive manner. "This bit of injury won't be a hindrance."

Even Ling, who had been traumatized, was moved by Roland's alluring words. Though she did not echo the others' words, her eyes were glimmering, as Roland saw through the rearview mirror.

Roland felt deeply touched. It turned out that boosting the team's morale was truly a simple thing to do.

...

In order to prevent policemen from popping by their place, he decided not to drive into Tongzi Street, and instead parked the car next to the neighboring Clover Association's construction site, which was still under demolition and hence was a surveillance blind spot. From there was a nice little pathway which led to the rented warehouse.

Subsequently, it was time to examine the spoils.

Regrettably, there was not much cash in the safe, amounting to only 100000 dollars or so. However, there was a considerable amount of jewelry, consisting of jades and pearls. It was not possible to place a fixed valuation on them. To his surprise, he also discovered several solidified Forces of Nature. It was these small yet exceptionally heavy things which gave him the false perception that the trip was indeed fruitful.

Are cash transactions already out of vogue for these people? Forces of Nature are now a currency?

By the time Roland returned to 0827, it was already half past 11. He gently opened the door and discovered that the lights were lit in the parlor. Zero was lying by the tea table with her back arched and slightly undulating, as if she had already entered dreamland. In front of her were a stack of textbooks and a pencil box. It was evident that she had been revising her homework while waiting for his return.

There was only supposed to be a tenant-landlord relationship between them, but there seemed to be a sense of family now. Roland's heart softened as he gazed at this sight.

He walked up and gently carried Zero to her bed. After taking off her shoes, he covered her in the warm quilt.

Oh right, the textbooks.

If she forgets about them tomorrow, she'll blame me again.

Roland shook his head and laughed. He brought the textbooks on the tea table to her room and stacked them neatly on Zero's desk. At this moment, the bold print on a textbook cover caught his attention.

Junior High Math Olympiad.

This was an extracurricular subject which appeared impressive but was thoroughly impractical. He recalled that he was uninterested in math when he was in junior high, and, thinking that Math Olympiad was simply a higher level of math, he kept his distance from it, and would rather spend his summers learning sketching and calligraphy than attend Math Olympiad lessons. Therefore, at present, he had not the slightest idea what the course was about.

Strangely, he began to take interest in its content, if only for a moment.

He could feel his breath becoming shorter.

He took a deep breath and slowly flipped open the first page of the textbook.

The neatly-arranged examples, together with Zero's elegant handwriting, caught his eye at once.

Chapter 800: The Revived Harbor

A flat yet spacious concrete ship slowly made its way into Clearwater Bay and berthed in front of Simbady.

Its size was much larger than that of the small boats which occasionally appeared in the Silver Stream, and its weight made it practically impossible to be rowed by manpower. On its top stood two long metal cylinders that puffed out billows of black smoke. Its sides were painted an eye-catching tangerine color, which together with the smooth gray deck made the ship look like a belly-up rainbow trout at first glance.

Like most of his brethren, Simbady had never left the desert, and rarely if ever saw the ocean. Thus, when he saw that this ship was not made of wood, he could not help but exclaim in marvel.

There was a stir of excitement among the ranks.

"Pah!"

Osha's supervisor immediately snapped a whip towards their heads. "Keep your mouths shut! Line up and get on the ship, faster!"

Simbady felt the crowd begin to stream forward. With the people behind him jostling, it was impossible not to move. As he was carried by the momentum of the crowd on to the ship, a slight fear arose in his heart.

Perhaps, he should never have left Silver Stream Oasis to come to this foreign land. Though there was an endless supply of water here, there was a chance that the Three Gods could not watch over such a remote place, and therefore would not hear their cries for help if the ship carried them into the abyss of Styx's River.

"Hold on to me and watch your step!" Molly's voice caused him to regain consciousness.

A delicate hand wrapped around his palm and led him on to the gangway. Every now and then, someone from beside him would fall into the water with a splashing sound.

Though the people on the pier would quickly pull them ashore, to fall into the river in this sort of weather essentially meant that they lost the qualification to work.

When they pleaded to be reallocated onto the ship, the standard reply they received was a lash from a whip.

Simbady remained close to Molly and followed the flow onto the concrete ship. As his foot met the deck, he did not feel the wobble he had expected. The ship was completely still, and it felt no different from walking on land.

When the gangway was withdrawn, the honcho of Osha clan, Thuram, appeared on the high platform in the middle of the large ship and drew everyone's attention. "Do y'all still remember what I said? The chief values order and discipline above all else! Take a

look at your clansmen who fell into the water. The original plan was for everyone to board smoothly and receive a work opportunity, so that you may obtain ample food even in the Months of Demons. But now, they'll have to starve until the next opportunity comes about! This was all caused by your stupidity!"

"It was nothing but a fall. All they need is a change of clothes...", an Ironsand citizen retorted, but before he could finish his sentence, two supervisors had pressed him down on the floor and subsequently tossed him into the water.

"Discipline is everything! There's no collective that accommodates the individual, only individuals who submit to the collective!" Thuram rebuked angrily. "Unlike the clan wars of the past, it's no longer lurking enemies who are being eliminated, but rather your own kin! Take this as my first lesson to all of you and remember it!" He paused before continuing, "Of course, those who lost their jobs today will only go hungry for a while. However, in the future, anyone from the Sand Nation or tribe who doesn't observe order shall be banished from this evergreen land!"

As his voice fell, a booming noise erupted from the metal cylinders and rolled across the sky above Port of Clearwater.

The giant metal wheels on both sides of the hull gradually began to rotate. After a violent shake, the concrete ship slowly sailed out towards the mouth of the river.

" Thank you. If it wasn't for you..." Simbady glanced at Molly.

The latter laughed and narrowed her eyes to slits. "It's nothing. It just happened that I was ahead of you in the order."

"Really..." He lowered his head with some embarrassment.

He and Molly were both members of the Fishbone clan, and they had conversed with each other on occasion. He had always been fond of this hazel-eyed, black-braided-hair girl, but having heard that she already had a sweetheart, he had thought it wiser not to reveal his feelings to her.

After some silence, he gazed at her while she leaned over the side of the ship, curiously observing the scenery on both sides of the river. He could not help asking, "Are you not the least bit worried about where we're going?"

She turned her head back. "Blackwater Valley?"

"Indeed. I've heard from the other clansmen that it's close to the Choke Swamp and Rotten Wasteland, and has been cursed by the Three Gods. Anyone who enters without permission will never be able to come back alive."

"So, did they apply for permission?"

"Eh, about this..."

Molly laughed involuntarily. "Don't they hope that as little people as possible get this job, so that their own clansmen may

receive more money? You've also heard from Lady Drow Silvermoon that so long as you do things according to the chief's instructions, you'll never have to worry about the material needs of your family, while your tribe will also receive resource subsidies." She puffed out a mouthful of white air. "Besides, do we have a choice?"

The last sentence truly shut Simbady up. Indeed, the first clans to willingly follow Osha to the Southern Territory of Graycastle were predominantly small tribes which found it hard to continue in the Silver Stream Oasis. Fishbone was one of them. The oasis which they had occupied was currently being devoured by the desert, while the increasingly dry tributary of the Silver Stream made it impossible to guarantee the survival of the clan. In order to survive, they either had to join another big clan, or venture towards the Southern Territory.

"Thinking positively, at least the chief has fulfilled his first promise. We no longer have to worry about starving to death in the desert, right?"

Simbady could not refute this point. According to Lady Silvermoon's explanation, even those who were not able to attain a job out at sea would be able to receive a basic ration. As long as they could perform odd jobs for the reconstruction of the Southern Territory, they would not starve to death.

"Besides, there are Osha people following us to Blackwater Valley. You don't have to worry too much." Molly laughed and pointed at a ruined port in the distance. "Look there... the land allotted to our clan should be near to that black tower, right? It'll be great if we

can stay here forever."

Simbady looked towards the direction she pointed at. The Port of Clearwater appeared to have been divided into two. Half of it was a burnt-down wasteland which seemed to have been forgotten and deserted, with damaged houses and scorched wooden frames everywhere, and the courtyards were filled with weed. Conversely, the other half already possessed a budding vitality. Here, the Ironsand people had set up a series of tents, and people could be seen moving within the camp area. The damaged houses were being knocked down one after another, while freshly whittled wood was continuously being transported into the area.

Molly's smile caused a surge of anticipation to rise in his heart.

"Perhaps, after I'm done with the next three months of work and return here, near to the tower will be a line of brand-new wooden houses?"

The being-reconstructed town slowly disappeared in the distance, until the ship began to bobble up and down on the waves. The only scenery at present was the clear and boundless skyline.

They had entered into the ocean.

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